

木崎ちあき
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博多豚骨 ラーメンズ

HAKATA TONKOTSU RAMENS



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Season Opening Ceremony & First Inning

“So I told my client that ‘500 was fine.’ Not 5,000,000 – 500 yen.”

Xianming Lin entered the room with his shoes on and looked over the man with a scornful gaze.

“Just 500 yen, you know? That means the lives of bastards like you are only worth that much. Do you understand?”

The man did not hide his confusion. “Ha? No, what? Who are you?”

“A killer.”

Lin answered him plainly and took out his preferred weapon – a Chinese knife pistol. He was accustomed to the grip of it in his hand. *Now then, it's time to get to work.* He first cut the man's tendon in his heel to prevent him from moving. The man gave a yell and fell to the floor.

“You guys are the absolute worst. You guys ganged up on a female customer and raped her? And I heard you guys even took a video and threatened that you would upload it to the internet if she said anything to the police, am I right?”

The female college student – the victim in this incident – had only went out to eat at a restaurant. And the male workers assaulted her there. They did not care that it was during working hours; they had locked the restaurant, closed the curtains, and shockingly gang raped their customer. It was a brutal, inhumane act.

Lin looked down at the man and spat. “I'm thoroughly disgusted by shits like you.”

The victim had a taste of hell. However, she did not have the courage to report to the police. Even if the culprits were captured, they would just be released one day yet again. She was afraid of retribution and could not even cry herself to sleep over it.

And with the video in their hands as a means of extortion, she could still meet the same fate again. The men who hurt her were still living nearby, carefree. Unable to bear with her situation, she became mentally ill and was unable to

take a step out of her home. The victim's father, witnessing her agony, approached him with the job.

"Her father came to me crying. He told me he'd pay any amount necessary to kill all of you scum."

He painfully understood the feelings of the victim's family. His sister met with a similar fate. Lin, having been told of this job from a mediator, accepted it with a simple response. He told them it would be 500 yen for each person.

"It would've been great if you were caught by the police and sentenced to death." Lin got close to the man's face as he sat there slumped on the ground before continuing. "If you just went to prison, you'd just get off of there in a few years, right? You'd come back and just do the same thing again. You're the same as a psychopath. You guys are an illness. It'd be better for society to have you die here."

After he flicked open his knife, the man paled. He shook his head bit by bit.

"N-no. Please don't -"

As if I wouldn't, idiot. "I don't want to hear your hypocrisy. When she told you to stop, did you?"

The man's expression wavered at Lin's words. He looked like he was about to cry now.

Servers you right. Lin's lips curled into a smile. "So that's just how it is, you see."

The culprits were all three men who worked as part-timers. This man was the one who filmed it, and Lin knew the recorded data was kept in his home thanks to the informant.

"Hey, scumbag. Where is it? The data for the video?"

Just as he crushed his other leg the man told him the hidden area where the data was at. It was somewhere more simple than he expected. He was not satisfied enough, so he stuck a needle underneath his fingernails, sliced off the skin on his stomach, and castrated him with a kitchen knife for the final finishing touch. He took photos of the man's belongings on hand with a camera from beginning to end and handed over the data to the victim's father. He then

did the same act of revenge to the other two culprits.

The job only earned him 1500 yen for the day, but he was satisfied. Lin passed through the Chikushi exit at the JR Hakata Station on quick feet and arrived to the usual street. After walking ten minutes from the station, the characters 'Banba Detective Office' on the window of the apartment building's third floor came into view.

"Ah, Lin-chan, welcome home."

When he opened the door to the office he heard the voice of his roommate, Zenji Banba. He had quite the cheerful attitude, inappropriate for greeting a man who just killed three people. Lin relaxed.

He ignored it, but as he was went inside these words were said. "Where's the 'I'm home' now? Didn't they teach you how to greet someone in school?"

"Not at all."

He did not go to school that much in the first place.

"Where did ya go? You put on such a short skirt and came back early in the mornin'. Dontcha tell me you were out hangin' at some strange club, right?"

".....Shut up. Are you trying to be my mother?" He denied it, giving a sigh.

"As if I would go out somewhere. It was work."

Banba had the newspaper spread open. It was the local paper for western Japan. His eyes caught the header, 'Illegal Club Exposed.' *Was he referring to this when he mentioned a weird club?*

Other disturbed titles were on the front of the paper: 'A Body – Killed by Poison – Found in Hakata Bay. Is It a Systematic Offense?', 'Imposter Phone Call Fraud – Multiple Damages in Fukuoka,' 'A Mail-Order Firm Leaked 1,000,000 Client Information. A Temporary Worker Has Been Arrested.' *The world is filled with never ending crimes.* He lamented. *Well, it's not like I'm qualified to make comments like that.* Lin ridiculed himself.

He leaned back into the sofa and turned on the TV. It was about time for the sports news.

'Player Cabrera has made a record of 605 home runs this past season, making

him number one in professional baseball history. And he is actively pushing for it as well in this current season.'

The announcer talked excitingly.

'At last night's game they managed to hit two home runs, and presently he is far away at the top of both leagues! They have been lined up in his record from last year.'

The commenters on the TV were also giving praise to the player together.

"605. That's amazin'." Banba muttered in admiration. He then folded the newspaper quickly and stood up. "I can't fall behind, so I'm fixin' to go to the battin' cage."

"And how are you going to compete with that.....?" Lin sighed. *You're just a grasslot baseball player.*

Banba finished making his arrangements in a hurry and closed the door.

"I'm off."

Lin called out to him while carrying the bat case on his back. "Ah, that's right. We're out of toilet paper. Buy it on your way back."

Banba had asked him, "Where's the 'take care' now?" However, he ignored it.

Top of First Inning

Shunsuke Saruwatari.

It had been two months since he joined the baseball team at a veteran school. Around the time the first year student was cutting corners for the daily practices, tired of muscle training and playing fetch, Naoya Nitta came to know of that man.

Saruwatari was a strange person.

The first aspect to note was that he ran faster than anyone in running. He sprinted as fast as he could go as though it was a short distance race. Every time they practiced swinging the bat or were doing muscle training he would try to

catch more balls than anyone. He even pushed aside other first years that were in the direction the ball was flying towards to catch it.

What a strange guy, Nitta had thought.

What is he so desperate for? If he loosened up he could live with less stress. Nitta felt something close to an odd impatience as he watched that reckless, single-minded Saruwatari with a cold gaze.

Saruwatari must be anticipating for the coach to notice him. *'I'm practicing real hard. I have a fighting spirit, so please use me.'* Perhaps he was going all out to appeal to him. *He's stupid. It's not like anyone is really watching.*

So he had thought, but apparently that was not the case. He learned that Saruwatari simply hated losing a few days later.

That day the first years were allowed to play in a game. Although it was more accurately a competition between the second years and the first years. The game was limited to three innings. The team members were put on defensive positions as according to their coach's designation. The goal was to also evaluate the first years' true abilities in this game. They did not have many opportunities to go up to bat or to take defensive positions, but since they had one they had to impress their coach.

'Next, Nitta.' Nitta's name was called for the second match. 'You'll be the catcher.'

Nitta had always been a catcher since he was in elementary school and middle school. He gave a short response and put on his protective gear.

The next one to be called was that man.

'Saruwatari.' The coach addressed the first year in the line. 'How about you try to pitch.'

So that man Saruwatari was a pitcher? He had not expected they would end up being batterymates. This was a strange occurrence.

The other team was the first to bat.

Nitta approached Saruwatari as he was soothing down the mound with his feet.

‘I can’t pitch anything but fastballs.’

As he was about to check up with him about the types of pitches and signs they could go for Saruwatari had made that statement.

He did not mean he could not throw them; he had no intention to throw any other pitches. He had that peculiar self-confidence in his tone. *He’s even more strange*, he thought. If he could throw other kinds of pitches he would appeal more to their coach by showing them here. He attempted to explain that to him, but Saruwatari was stubbornly fixated on the fastballs.

What shocked him more was that Saruwatari was a submarine man – underhand pitcher.

He had caught several of his pitches in pitching practices, but there was a smooth movement to Saruwatari’s straight balls. He felt they were faster than actual fastballs. He would lift up his right leg, drop it back down while taking a step forward and bend over. His arm would whip out and release the ball just barely above the ground with an underside throw. To manage pitching such a fast ball with that rare form must be difficult to accomplish the timing.

The first batter entered the batter’s box. The game began.

Their opponents were second year students. Meanwhile they were a team of nine new members gathered in a rush who had done nothing but fitch for practice. He saw what the end result would be from the very beginning. The game was terrible. Error, error, error. The third baseman let the grounder pass between his feet, the shortstop made a poor pass, and the right fielder made a foul fly. And the pitcher Saruwatari had consecutive foul balls. In no time at all they were down by six points. In just one inning Nitta had to run over to the mound three times.

This is going to be a long turn at defense. Nitta prepared himself for it, but Saruwatari’s pitches started to get better. His control and aim gradually became steady, and he finally got the hang of his true potential. In the third inning he managed a splendid clean up, giving the team three strikes consecutively.

However, the difference in ability to the rest of the team was apparent. For their offense, only Nitta managed to earn them a point with a solo home run, so the end score was nine to one – a huge defeat. ‘Well, that is to be expected.’

Nitta thought as he returned to home base. He already foresaw their loss, so he was not very bitter over it. It was expected they would lose here. This game from the beginning was a rite of passage where famous group of teams from other regions gathered to crush the excessively conceited first year students' pride. They meant to discourage them and have them learn to brace themselves. So they only needed to try this much. That was what he thought.

However, Saruwatari thought differently.

As the next game began to take place on the field, Nitta had headed to the washroom to wash his face. He spotted Saruwatari there.

Shit, Saruwatari howled. The next moment he threw his glove with an underthrow at the school building wall. He could feel the frustration he could not hold in pouring off of him. This man appeared to despise losing.

'What are you doing?'

When Nitta called out to him, Saruwatari turned around to face him quickly. After he stared with wide eyes for a moment, he glared him down. His face was red, burning up in frustration and bitterness.

Nitta reached down to pick up the glove he threw. It was a well-used glove manufactured domestically, and it was drenched in sweat and covered in white sand.

'You have to take good care of your equipment.'

His coach he had when he was in a junior team in elementary school always said that. *'Your baseball equipment was a part of your body. Anyone who did not handle their equipment with care had no qualifications to play baseball.'* He thought that as well. Throwing his glove at a wall was unacceptable.

Nitta picked up the glove and handed it over to Saruwatari. 'Here, handle it with care now.'

'.....And who are you?' Saruwatari bared his teeth. He had a unique accent to his speech. 'You're pretty fucking annoying.'

Hey, I don't get any thanks even though I picked it up for you? Nitta smiled bitterly.

Saruwatari did not seem satisfied based off of the attitude he had been giving him, but Nitta decided to offer him comforting words. Backing up the pitcher was also the catcher's role.

'Today's match couldn't have gone any better. None of us have been able to hold the ball recently, and our game sense was weak. Our backup was worn out too. But I don't think your pitches were bad though.'

'.....Couldn't have gone better, you say?' Saruwatari glared at him with a sharp gaze. 'Did you just say we couldn't have been better?'

Should I not have said that? When he tilted his head, Saruwatari continued imperiously.

'There ain't no such thing as a hopeless game. I'm gonna become a pro someday and be the best pitcher in Japan, so I can't lose to the likes of high schoolers.'

I see, so the reason he wasn't going to pitch anything but straights was for that reason? He wanted to hold those high schoolers back with just fastballs. If he could not accomplish that then he could not become a professional. He set that bar for himself.

To become a pro was everyone's dream on their team. But even for those who want to become one, there were also those who began to secretly believe it may be out of their league. It was difficult enough to appear in Koshien let alone enter the professional world. Nitta felt that way. As such, he felt slightly envious of this man who was able to talk about his dream without embarrassment.

'It was my fault for the grounders today. If I made them all get three strikes then we would have won.'

Nitta was taken aback at his response.

Take all of them out on his own? That is absolutely impossible. Baseball is not a sport for one person to play. Why is he a fielder then?

And yet, he meant what he was saying. He was telling him this with completely honest eyes. *This man is unreasonable.*

At the same time he considered him intriguing.

‘.....Haha,ahaha.’

He accidentally slipped a laugh. *He’s amusing. This is too hilarious.* Nitta laughed, wrapping his arms around his stomach. This is the first time I’ve seen an idiot like him.

‘Ah?’ Saruwatari was sullen. ‘And what the hell is so funny to you, bastard.’

‘No, nothing is. Ahaha.’

‘Are you making me out as a fool?!’

Nitta waved his hand and dismissed it.

‘No, not that. I just thought that you are great.’

‘.....Ha?’

‘Seriously, you’re the best.’

He was laughing so hard tears were forming.

‘But I will mention one thing.’ Nitta told him while wiping the corners of his eyes with his finger. ‘If the catcher turns away, then no one would get three strikes.’

No matter how many fast straight balls or curved balls Saruwatari pitched, without anyone to catch them no one could take a batter out. Without a capable catcher who would not miss those pitches, there would be no way he could throw to first base to achieve three strikes.

‘You have to trust in your allies too. At the very least, I’d like you to have faith in me.’

Saruwatari made an unimpressed expression and tutted. ‘.....You can shut up.’

He truly is fascinating. If it’s with this man, I may be able to aim for something higher. For Koshien or even further. That was how he felt. He had that sort of attitude to make him feel that way.

‘Hey, Sarucchi.’

When he called him by the over-familiar nickname, Saruwatari had scowled. 'What the hell is Sarucchi, tch.'

'See? You did it.' Nitta pointed to his face. 'Since you say nothing but tch, tch, tch, you're Sarucchi.'

'Haa? Drop that nickname.'

Nevertheless, Nitta did not.

'Let's win next time, Sarucchi.'

After Saruwatari glanced at him he huffed in annoyance.

Bottom of First Inning

A blue sedan that was made domestically sped down the three-lane national highway. Nitta drove the vehicle towards their destination relatively quickly.

Saruwatari was sitting in the passenger's seat. He was of the same grade as him in high school and a teammate of the same baseball team. He was slightly taller and his hair was longer than that time, but his face as he looked out the window in boredom still had traces from then.

The two had a relationship as a pitcher and catcher in their high school days, yet how they ended up working together as a hitman and a killer consultant happened a few weeks prior. *What a strange fate*, Nitta thought to himself.

They were heading to meet their client at the moment. They would discuss with the organization which showed interest in Saruwatari at length. The party specified to meet at a park in the center ward of Fukuoka.

"Now try and not to be rude with them."

Nitta began to talk about the job while he sped up the car to make it to their meeting on time, but there was no response from Saruwatari. He had not been paying attention at all.

"Hey, Sarucchi."

He stepped on the brakes and said his name in a slightly louder voice. While

he waited for the light, he turned to face Saruwatari.

“Did you hear what I said?”

“Not at all.” Saruwatari replied to him while still looking out the window, not even stifling his yawn.

“You’re kidding me.”

He sighed. *Guess I have to explain from the beginning again.*

“You’ve been spacing out quite a bit. You’re still thinking about that previous game, aren’t you?”

He heard no reply from Saruwatari. He hit the mark.

Nitta and Saruwatari belonged to a grasslot baseball team based in Kitakyushu. Their positions were, as usual, Nitta as the catcher and Saruwatari as the pitcher.

Last week their team participated in a tournament in Fukuoka prefecture. Their opponent for the first match was a Fukuoka team called the Hakata Tonkotsu Ramens. It was primarily a pitchers’ battle packed with an unbelievable strong defense but poor batting, but the balance fell apart at the last half. At the bottom of eighth inning with zero to zero points, the Ramens’ third batter managed to hit a preempt solo home run. He hit the straight ball with all his strength in a full swing, and it went into the stands. It was a line drive.

“I get you’re bitter over it, but we won in the end by coming from behind.”

Offering him encouraging words like ‘we won the game’ had no effect on this man. “It ain’t. Fine.” Saruwatari spat.

After that their team made a come back due to Nitta’s home run and managed to obtain victory, but Saruwatari exploded in dissatisfaction. Saruwatari’s tendency to get bitter was no different from back then. If Nitta had not stopped him he would have continued striking the benches or the other nine members.

“.....Do you know that second baseman?”

Saruwatari had shown a strange attachment to the Ramens’ Zenji Banba. They

must have some sort of connection, but Saruwatari denied it.

“Not really.”

He figured he was lied. “Well, it doesn’t matter to me.” Nitta gave a bitter smile and decided to focus on driving.

“Ah.”

Just as he was making a right turn across the intersection, Saruwatari had suddenly raised his voice.

“Hey, stop the car.”

“Eh? Why?”

“Just listen and stop.”

He was well aware he was a man who would not listen to anything else. Nitta unwillingly parked the car on the shoulder of the road.

“What’s up all the sudden?”

“I spotted a batting center.”

He could see a batting center a few meters ahead of them. They seemed to have a space for pitching practice as well.

Saruwatari took off his seat belt and opened the car door. “I’m going to go pitch for a bit.”

“Eh? No, you can’t. What are you saying?” He hastily grabbed his arm and pulled him back. “We’re heading for work right now. We don’t have time to go astray.”

“You can go by yourself. I’ll hear about it later from you.”

“Are you serious right now?”

He sighed again. As usual, he was a selfish man. It would be impossible to stop him.

“Are you that bothered you were beaten? You have quite the strange obsession with him. Something happened between you and that man Banba, right?”

“There ain’t nothing much to it!” Saruwatari was irritated. *I hit the nail on the head. He’s so easy to read. As usual he can’t lie to others or himself.*

Nitta called out to him once more after he got out of the car.

“Don’t break your legs from overdoing it. For a killer their body is their capital, so take care of yourself, alright?”

He received an answer from Saruwatari that indicated he did not comprehend it at all, “I got it.”

Guess I should take a nap. Lin had just turned off the TV and laid down onto the sofa when he heard three knocks on the office door. It was a reserved and eloquent sound.

Someone had come. He sluggishly got up and headed to the entrance. After he unlocked it and opened the door a woman stood there. She was wearing a white one piece dress and held a black sun umbrella in her right hand.

“Hello.”

The woman smiled gently.

Lin was shocked at their rare guest – well, it was rare in of itself for a guest to appear at the Banba Detective Office.

He stared at the guest closely. She had no particular, unique facial features. Her eyes, nose, and lips were neither large or small. Yet she was beautiful. She seemed to be in her late twenties. He recalled that her name was Sayuri. She was an acquaintance of Banba’s, but to an extend, Lin’s as well since he had exchanged a few words with her at their grasslot baseball match.

“.....Hello.” Lin greeted her, unchivalrous.

She was graceful and had the look of someone who could not even kill a bug, but she was skilled in his trade as well. He heard from Banba she was skilled enough to assassinate the top of the Kakyuu Group, Wang Fang Lang, with ease.

“Is Zenji here?”

“Zenji?” *Ahh, she means Banba.* “He’s out at the moment.”

Banba had said he was going to the batting center and left the office an hour

ago.

Is that so? Sayuri had whispered and made a slightly troubled expression.

“Well, I think he should be back soon.” Lin jerked his chin in gesture. “Want to wait inside?”

“Is it alright?”

“I don’t really care.”

“Thank you.” Sayuri smiled brightly. She was beautiful with a smile too. He unconsciously was charmed by her.

He invited her in and had her sit on the sofa.

“We don’t have anything but oolong tea.”

“That’s fine.”

He handed over the tea he poured into a cup. “Here you go.”

Considering he should let the man they were waiting on, he tried to call Banba. The dialing kept going. He could not get in touch with him. After a while, the guidance to the answering machine began to play. It was the same regardless of how many times he called him.

“Hey, it’s me.” He unwillingly left a voicemail. “You have a guest here, so hurry up and come back.”

They had won the match, but he had lost the fight.

The infamous killer of killers, the Niwaka Samurai – the man by the name Zenji Banba was the second baseman of the Ramens’. He had lost to that man. For his main occupation they had settled with a tie, but he had two consecutive defeats. He lost to their death match and he could not hit a home run. Surely, he had not trained enough. How he was right now was not enough. He had to surpass his current self or else he would not be able to beat that man. So he had to throw better.

The batting center Saruwatari visited only had five old machines set up. Home plate and the batter’s box were partitioned off by a green net. At the first end there was only one different colored booth. It was the strikeout area for

pitchers to use that Saruwatari had his eyes on. Eighteen to forty-four meters ahead of him there were signs with the numbers one to nine written on them. The game was to hit those planks with the balls.

There was only one other person there besides Saruwatari. It was a man. He was in the center batting booth and hitting back the baseballs the machine was firing 120 kilometers away.

When he saw the man's face Saruwatari was taken aback.

"Ah! It's you!"

He unconsciously yelled.

It was that man. The Niwaka Samurai, Zenji Banba.

".....Hm?" Banba turned around and noticed Saruwatari. "Ah, you're that ninja with no control."

"Who the hell has no control, stupid face!"

He had no idea he would meet with him here. However, this was convenient. He did not have to waste time searching for him. Saruwatari jerked with his chin. "Come out against me. I'll pay you what I owe."

"Pay me?" Banba looked away from Saruwatari and back to the machine. "..... Ahh, I don't care 'bout that. You don't have to."

He turned sullen getting lightly brushed off like that. "Ah? What the hell are you sayin', you bastard."

"Sorry, but I'd like to be in private. Leave me be."

Banba was completely invested into batting. He showed no ounce of interest in Saruwatari. His behavior frustrated him. *Dammit*, Saruwatari tutted. *How dare that shitty bastard ignore me.*

There was the sound of a clash, and a baseball flew out of the machine. Banba swung the bat. He hit the ball back. He did not hit it dead on, so there was just the clear sound of the ball being hit.

"Ha," Seeing that, Saruwatari laughed to ridicule him. "Too bad."

For a moment, Banba looked over at him with a sullen expression. However,

he moved his gaze back again and waited for the next pitch. He swung the bat once more, but he failed on fully hitting it again. The ball dropped down with not much force behind it.

Saruwatari murmured loud enough so the other could hear him. "That was a sloppy, grounder to the shortstop aannnd a double-play."

".....Shut up."

It did not appear Banba could ignore him this time. He grimaced and said that back to him. Saruwatari felt better that his meager teasing worked. He snorted and put a hundred yen coin into the strikeout machine. He grabbed the baseball and looked among the planks numbered one through nine. He focused and set himself into the motion to pitch. He lifted up his leg and took a huge step forward. He wiped his arm around and let go of the ball. The feeling was not bad.

The ball he threw veered to the right, passed the side of the board and hit the back wall.

"Zero aim!"

He heard the voice from his side. Banba had his bat placed on his shoulders, and he was grinning at him. "You can't even graze the board there."

This time Saruwatari was the one to sulk. "It's not like I was aiming for the board."

"Eh? But there ain't nothin' else."

"I'm practicing my curve balls!"

"Dontcha make excuses again."

Shit, he tutted. *How dare he make a fool of me.*

"If you're going to say that I'll hit one this time."

"Ohh, which one?" Banba raised one eyebrow. His tone was teasing.

He picked up the ball.

"Number seven."

He declared his target. It was a low outside pitch for a right handed batter. He

had too much strength put into his first pitch, and it completely passed the target, right overhead of it.

For his second pitch, the trajectory was too low. He threw more. However, none were in the striking zone. Finally his next pitch hit the board. However, it directly hit the frame of the board. There was a thud, and the ball bounced back.

“Foul ball.” Banba muttered.

Dammit. I’ll kill him.

“.....Number five.”

He switched his target to the one in the middle and pitched again. And again. And again. And again. He pitched in succession. However, none of them hit.

Banba had been watching and blurted out. “Alrighty, that’s a forced run right there.”

This guy pisses me off. “Shut it! I’ll kill you!”

“.....He’s late.”

Lin glanced at the clock on the wall and muttered that to himself.

It had been thirty minutes. However, Banba had yet to return. He was making his guest wait. He started to feel irritated again.

Sayuri did not seem to mind the time and was reading a paperback book on the sofa. Lin decided to try and call Banba again. However he did not pick up. He still went to voicemail.

“Where are you? I said to hurry up and come back.” He left another voicemail. “Ah, and also don’t forget to buy toilet paper.”

Lin dropped the call and sighed.

“Do you live together?”

Sayuri spoke up suddenly. She looked up from her book and was gazing at Lin.

“.....Eh? Well, more like I’m freeloading.”

“Are you possibly Zenji’s lover?”

“As if.”

After he strongly denied it Sayuri chuckled. She seemed to have already known. He shrugged and sat down facing her.

“Well, I heard you were that guy’s lover too at one point.” Lin questioned. He recalled the informant Enokida saying that before.

“Yes.” She acknowledged it readily, to his surprise. “It was a long time ago.”

She smiled lightly, feeling nostalgic, before moving on.

“I was hired to kill Zenji. So I pretended not to know anything about Zenji and approached him.”

So she got in a love relationship with him to have him drop his guard? She’s a tougher woman than she appears. He considered to himself. *Otherwise she wouldn’t have been a killer in the first place though.*

“You know, he has become more reserved lately, but a long time ago he was quite the naughty man. He was a womanizer and messed around, so it was really simple to get close to him.”

Sayuri chuckled mischievously.

“Are you serious?” Lin raised his voice in surprise. He heard quite the intriguing story.

That man, a womanizer? Naughty man? Messed around? That slovenly, unappealing guy? He could not imagine it.

The moment he was about to ask for more details, the office door opened.

“I’m home.”

It was Banba’s voice. Speaking of the man himself.

“.....You finally came back.” Lin stood up and headed to the entrance.

“Where’s the ‘welcome home?’”

“More importantly, you’re late. I called you numerous times.”

“Sorry ‘bout that. A lot happened.”

When he looked, he saw that Banba was empty handed. He was only carrying

his bat case on his back, and both of his hands were empty.

“.....Where’s the toilet paper?”

Banba suddenly realized when Lin said that. “Ahh, I forgot!”

“What the hell were you doing?!” Even though he pressed him for it so many times. “You’re useless!”

“When I got to the batting center I remembered it.” Although Lin was angry with him, Banba only laughed.

After he gave a large sigh,

“Ahh, that’s right.” He told him as though he just remembered. “You have a guest waiting for you.”

Lin pointed to the sofa with his chin. Banba looked over to the woman in the reception area. “Ah, Sayuri-san. You came.”

“Didn’t you tell me to come?”

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine. I was able to talk with him too.” Sayuri said, keeping her eye on Lin. Her lips covered in beige lipstick curved into a lax smile.

“Geh.” The complexion of Banba’s face changed. “.....Sayuri-san, you didn’t say nothin’ personal right?”

“She was just about to tell me.” Lin smirked.

“Zenji.” Sayuri took out a file from her bag and handed it over to Banba. “Here you are. Just as promised.”

Banba took a seat facing Sayuri and checked the contents of it. “As expected of you, Sayuri-san.” He admired her work.

“What is that?” Lin peeked over from the side and asked.

“A list of names of the Kakyuu Group’s members.” Sayuri had answered him.

“The Kakyuu Group?”

The Kakyuu Group was a developing multinational mafia based in Fukuoka. Lin had worked for them in the past as well.

“I asked Sayuri-san here to steal it. After assassinating the president.”

“So you have that stolen and then what do you plan to do?”

Banba answered with a serious expression. “I’m gonna annihilate the Kakyuu Group.”

It was in a room on the highest floor of an apartment building in Beijing. In the center of the living room there was a large Persian carpet laid out with a black leather sofa placed on top. All four walls were decorated with numerous photos. *Actually, this man had an interest in collecting works of art*, he recalled. That detail was listed on the data he received about his target.

When Zhao arrived to the room the man had a wine glass in one hand and was watching television with a massive screen. Speakers were set up on both sides of it, and the footage was high quality. It was almost like a movie theater.

The resident of this room, which he had invested money into nearly as a hobby, was Fu Jian Huang – a man who belonged to the Beijing subdivision of the criminal organization Shou Wang. He was fifty years old. He wore a light purple gown and had a beer belly. At first he shouted at him arrogantly, but he went quiet after being beaten repeatedly. When he turned his blade towards him and threatened him the man raised both hands in earnest.

He heard Shou Wang had their main base in Hong Kong. Their primary source of income was from drugs. They presented themselves in public as a pharmaceutical company and collaborated with various suspicious companies and organizations, working on researching new drugs and development. However, in actuality what they traded were dangerous substances including new kinds of regulated drugs, poisons, truth serums, and viruses used for war and terrorism. The range of their activities remained within China, but they seemed to be trying to branch out to Macau, Seoul and even Japan, and so there were a few opposing organizations working to quickly weaken their influence. And Zhao, a freelance killer, had received a job from one of those opposing organizations.

He had two requests to carry out. One was to kill Huang. The other was to obtain the new virus sample this man possessed.

“What is your name?” Zhao looked at the man and asked him. It was to

confirm who he was for certain.

“.....Fu-Fu Jian Huang.”

The man answered with difficulty. He was indeed his target.

“Where is the virus your guys made?”

He questioned him, but Huang remained silent. However he saw him glance over to the center wall for a moment.

“I see. There, huh.” Zhao grinned and nodded.

In that direction was a photo set up on a wall. When he removed it there was a safe built into the wall. *Found it. The virus must be inside.*

Now that he knew the hiding place of it he had no more use for the man.

After Zhao raised his blade over his head, Huang panicked.

“Wa-wait. Don’t kill me!”

“Are you stupid?” Zhao sighed. “I’m a professional killer, you know? Killing is my job.”

Huang’s eyes darted around, and he tried to string words together. “.....Y-you want the virus, right? I’m the only one who can open that safe. As long as you don’t kill me, I’ll hand over the contents inside it.”

“No one else but you can open it, you say.....”

Zhao closely examined the safe. There were sturdy doors and no dial or keypad on it. There was also no hole for a key to fit in. What it did have were a scanner and a small camera. Then it was a biometric system. What he would need were fingerprints and retinas scanned.

“It doesn’t seem like that’ll be an issue even if you’re dead. As long as I have your fingers and eyeballs.”

“Wa-wait!” Huang’s complexion changed, and he yelled. “It won’t open if you kill me!”

“.....What the hell’s with you? Enough. You’re annoying.”

“Besides the fingerprints and a retina scan it would also need a voice print as

well.” He pointed to the safe. “It’s programmed to not open unless I say my name into the microphone.”

“Then it’ll be fine.”

Zhao stated and took out a small device from his pocket. It was a voice recorder. After he rewinded it a little bit he hit the play button.

‘What is your name?’

‘.....Fu-Fu Jian Huang.’

Huang became dumbfounded upon hearing the recorded conversation and his eyes opened wide in shock. This was in Zhao’s favor.

“Right? It won’t be a problem even if you’re dead.” Zhao reaffirmed his grip on his weapon. It was a Chinese sword with a curved blade called a Lancet. He threw it down swiftly, cutting off Huang’s head.

The body collapsed onto the floor. Blood spurted forth from the severed area and dyed the high quality carpet red. The head that was lopped off rolled across the ground and stopped when it hit the wall. It had the plain face of a dead person with eyes and mouth opened wide.

He picked up that head and held it up in front of the safe’s camera. The next scan was for the fingerprints. He cut off a finger from Huang’s dead body and pressed it to the scanner. The last part was the voice print. He played Huang’s recorded voice into the microphone. The safe was tricked easily. ‘Identify confirmation completed.’ After the announcer’s voice stated there was the sound of a click; it had unlatched.

“That guy sure was stupid.” Zhao sneered.

There were two small cases within the safe. There were several syringes and vessels containing liquid inside for each case. One was the virus and the other was the counter virus. He had to hand over the cases themselves to his employer, but Zhao went ahead and swiped out one of the containers. He would not be found out if he took just one. He was a kleptomaniac by nature.

He also took the high quality items Huang was wearing on his person. He took the large jeweled rings from his brusque fingers. They had the crest of a beast

carved into them – the marking of a Shou Wang member. He had no objection to use them as spoils for this job.

Guess I should get going. The moment he thought that he got a call. It was a man named Yang – Zhao’s mediator.

He pressed the button to accept the call.

“What’s up, Yang?”

The other immediately brought up the main topic at hand. ‘I have good news for you, sir.’

Good news – there was only one thing that came to his mind when he said that. “.....Did you figure out *his* whereabouts?”

‘No, however, I have located the broker in charge of that man at the time. He has apparently retired and is living with his family in Busan.’

He could gain beneficial information if you talked to that broker. He finally managed to grab that man’s tail. His heart sped up.

‘Sir, where are you right now?’

“In Beijing.”

‘I am in Hong Kong. We ought to take tomorrow’s flight to Busan.’

Is that so? Zhao nodded in agreement. “Then let’s meet there.”

Disclaimer: I worked with [kinomiya-kazane](https://www.kinomiya-kazane.com/) on the Chinese names and words, but since I cannot read Chinese and they are more familiar with Simplified Chinese than Traditional, please let me know if there are any mistakes in the spelling or reading.

I also do not know much about baseball. I have never seen a game before on TV or in real life. I do my research and on occasion I ask others who are more familiar with the sport, but I may be prone to mistakes. Please advice.

Translation Notes:

Shou Wang (兽王) are written with the characters ‘beast’ and ‘king’ apparently, hence the marking on the rings as their symbol.

Any many thanks to [Voissane](#) for editing this massive chapter and giving me suggestions for better flow.

Second Inning

Top of Second Inning

I'm going to buy cigarettes. He had told him and got out of the car. It was the usual routine.

So he had let his guard down.

Renyi Li opened the back door of the car, took a step out onto the ground and began walking. Suzuki merely watched his large back absentmindedly.

It was cold that day, and there was a dust of snow. They were small, feathery snowflakes that could have been mistaken for dust, but it was not enough to stick together. Renyi ducked his head from the cold and proceeded through the parking garage with both hands still in his coat pockets. Abruptly, Renyi stopped. He had been striding along gallantly when he suddenly stopped in place.

What happened? Suzuki had found it peculiar. It was then.

There was the sound of a gunshot. Renyi stumbled. A bullet had struck through his heart and out his back. He vividly saw blood spurt forth from the opened hole in his body like mist.

Suzuki could only stare at the scene, dumbfounded with wide eyes.

He returned to himself and yelled his name.

'Ren-san – !'

But he could not voice it.

The one who shot Renyi was a young man. It was likely an opposing organization had their sights on Renyi. Suzuki saw the man get on his bike and run away from the scene in his peripheral. However, he had more to worry about at that moment.

Renyi's body slowly slumped backwards. Suzuki immediately rushed over to him and held him from behind, supporting him. He was shot in the heart. His

fresh blood seeped into his suit, dying it red. Renyi had a far-off look, and his pale lips had been shaking.

Suzuki was bewildered. He did not know what to say to get him to focus. *Please, don't die.* Suzuki merely continued to call his name.

The person he was supposed to protect was shot right in front of him. The reality was hard for him to accept. So he was terribly bewildered of it.

More snow fell onto the blood soaked ground and melting upon contact with it.

'Re-Ren-san -'

Renyi's body grew cold as he held him in his arms.

He felt a sting on his right cheek.

He was suddenly hit, and he stumbled from the impact. The relentless punishment did not cease.

'Even though the boss got killed, you got out of it without a scratch on you? You're quite the watchdog, aren't you? Suzukiii.'

'.....My apologies. Ngh.'

He wiped the blood from his nose with the back of his hand and went to stand up. He was kicked into his side, and he fell once more unto the hospital floor.

'Even a wild dog like you should know you have to pay your debts, right?'

One of the henchmen tossed him over a short sword.

'I think your pinky should suffice.'

He knew without being told to.

There was nothing worse for a bodyguard than seeing his master die in front of him. Suzuki caught sight of his master's body in the foreground and bit his tongue.

I'll cut off any number of my fingers. I'll offer my whole right hand. He picked up the blade from the floor and gripped it tightly in his left hand.

Just when he was about to swing down towards his wrist the hospital doors

opened without warning. Suzuki immediately stopped what he was about to do and looked up. A thin man wearing a suit stood there. The moment the henchmen saw his face they straightened up and hastily bowed their heads.

‘Leave us.’

The man ordered, and the other men quickly went out of the room. The only ones left were Suzuki and that man. Them and the corpse lying on the bed. Silence fell uncomfortably in the hospital room.

After a moment of silence the man spoke. ‘You know who I am right?’

Of course. Naturally, he knew.

He was Ruixi Li – Renyi’s younger brother.

‘.....I do.’

Suzuki nodded, his eyes still cast downward. He could not bring himself to face him.

After Li glanced at the body’s face he made a wry smile. ‘We don’t look much alike, right? We’re of a different mother.’

He knew that. However, as siblings they got along well. Renyi often spoke about his brother. They were the only siblings they had, so naturally Renyi was fond of his brother.

‘.....Your brother died because of me.’ Suzuki placed both of his hands and forehead onto the ground. ‘Even though I was there with him.....I am truly sorry.....!’

Renyi had taken Suzuki under his wing. He gave him this splendid job as his bodyguard and personal driver. He had saved him – a nobody.

And yet I could not repay the favor.

There was only one way he could repent for this.

He lifted up his head and gripped the blade was once more.

‘Stop that.’

The strict voice came from above him.

‘It’s old-fashioned to cut off your fingers in this day and age.’

Li shrugged his shoulders and picked up the short sword.

‘Besides, it would hinder your driving ability.’

‘.....My driving?’

What do you mean? He gazed at Li’s face.

His long slitted, disconcerted eyes narrowed slightly, and he lightly smiled.

‘Your first job.’

Li had told him and then threw him something. Suzuki immediately caught it with both hands. It was a car key.

‘I heard from my brother. That you’re an excellent man. I couldn’t just let you crumble here.’ Li turned away from him and left the room. ‘I’ll be waiting for you downstairs.’

Suzuki remained dumbfounded for a few moments. He reflected over Li’s words: driving, job, an excellent man, heard from my brother.

Brother.

Ahh, he exhaled. Heat began to return to his chilled body.

Before he realized it he was crying.

Suzuki clung to the man resting on top of the bed and wailed.

This man is unbelievable.

He buried his face into his chest and continued to cry.

Bottom of Second Inning

“Suzuki.”

After being called by his name he returned to himself. At some point the light had turned green. He quickly stepped on the acceleration.

He ended up thinking about that day again – that incident when he had lost his master five years ago. It was an unpleasant memory. Suzuki grimaced. He

brushed a hand through the back of his trimmed hair. Even though he was in a vehicle with the air conditioning working there was sweat on his hands that were gripping the handles.

“Suzuki.” The man sitting in the back seat, Ruixi Li, said his name again. “Did you hear what I said?”

“Of course.” Suzuki nodded. “You mentioned you needed cigarettes, right?”

Li told him they were out of cigarettes just a moment ago. He had heard him fine. That was how the memory of that day came to mind.

“There’s a convenient store ahead, so let’s go there.”

Li agreed with a mix of a sigh at Suzuki’s suggestion. “Let’s do that then.”

Suzuki parked at the convenient store’s parking garage and unlocked his seat belt. “I will go buy them. Please wait a moment.”

Without waiting for a response, Suzuki got out of the car and immediately locked it. The body of the car and the windows were bulletproof, but it was better to be safe than sorry. After he checked the area for any suspicious figures, he quickly headed to the store. He searched for the usual brand, told the number to the shop attendant and finished the shopping as fast as he could.

When Suzuki returned to the car Li was looking outside.

“Sorry for making you wait. Here they are.” Suzuki got into the driver’s seat and handed over the cigarettes.

Li took them from him. Suzuki started the car just as Li took one cigarette and lit it. He intended to quietly exhale to not hear him, but he was found out. Li was glaring at him from the rearview mirror.

“Suzuki.” Li’s voice was slightly exasperated when he said his name.

“.....What is it?”

“Stop doing that.”

Doing what? Before he could ask him that, Li continued.

“I can’t relax either when you expect malice every time you go to purchase cigarettes.”

Unable to find words, Suzuki fell silent for a short time.

He replied after scraping at his head. “.....Was I that obvious?”

“Yes, fairly.”

Li looked outside and exhaled the smoke.

“.....You can forget about my brother already.”

Those words pulled at his heart. Suzuki grimaced. *I can't help it.* He objected in his mind. *I can't forget something so easily just by being told to. No, I can't forget this. This is my punishment.*

I shouldn't have let him go by himself.

Every time Li desired cigarettes Suzuki ended up recalling his dead master. It was a sin both brothers had to be heavy smokers.

“.....By the way, about that case.”

Li spoke up once again. That case – he meant the traitor. They had discovered one of their members leaked information to another organization.

“That man was killed as you have instructed.” The man responsible was tortured before being put into a gas chamber and thrown into Hakata Bay per Li's orders. Right now Suzuki could not settle to be just Li's driver and bodyguard. He was different from back then when he was called just a dog. During these past five years he had been working as Li's subordinate in the inner workings of their organization.

“It seems there was other traitor as well.”

“But that man did not mention having comrades.”

“They probably were not acquaintances. He may have been hired by someone else.”

“I will look into it immediately.”

“Find anyone suspicious and execute them.”

“.....Understood.”

Long ago he wasn't the type of man to propose anything like that. Suzuki

thought, troubled. Li had changed. He was different than his brother. Since he became an advisor of the president Long Fang Wang, he had smiled less.

A few weeks ago that Wang was assassinated. The incompetent subordinates have been putting in every effort in their factional disputes than concerning themselves over the vacant position. In addition to the internal conflict in the group, there was now a rat sniffing around in the organization. Their problems kept piling up.

Ogori Park was a prefectural park in the center of Fukuoka City. It was nearly in the dead center of Fukuoka. The Fukuoka Castle Ruins, the baseball stadium, and museums were nearby, making the park a place for relaxation for the city's residents. Every year a fireworks display took place there.

There was a large pond in the center of the park. Several small birds were perched on the bridge crossing over it. There were rented boats with young men and women and families on them floating around in the pond. The paved garden walkways surrounding the lake were approximately two kilometers long for jogging. The runners wore multi-colored work outfits and were covered in sweat.

Nitta had planned to meet with the man at this place today. He arrived a little bit earlier, but the other was already waiting for him there. The man was near the boarding dock for the boats, and he signaled to Nitta to come over. With a beard and wore tinted sunglasses, he was obviously suspicious looking.

The man called himself Tony Lau. He must be someone from Hong Kong but spoke fluent Japanese. After he shook hands with Nitta, they got onto a swan boat. It was a type where two people had to pedal to work it. "We don't want anyone to hear us," the man said, and Nitta agreed.

The rental price was a thousand yen for thirty minutes. The two rowed the boat together. This man, Lau, was a subordinate of a criminal organization called Shou Wang, based in Hong Kong. Nitta had learned that Shou Wang made large trades in the drug business and pay well during his research into them. Lau was wary of people and he had a bad reputation when it came to using killers. To protect themselves they did not cut ties with the killers they hired often.

Nitta had heard about the request that someone was interested in hiring Saruwatari from an informant he knew in university just the previous day.

They slowly pedaled the boat forward with both legs until they reached an area no one was at.

“We are thinking of advancing our operations to Japan.” As expected since this land was the entrance for Asia to get into Japan.

“Since it’s nearby.” Lau nodded in affirmation.

When he was researching about them he saw they had an urgent reason as to why they were hurrying to make advancements in Japan. Many organizations handling drugs have existed in China since the early ages. Shou Wang was a new competing organization and the older groups could only see them as a hindrance. They seemed to have angered a large underground organization connected to the drug cartel in central and southern America recently, and even one of Shou Wang’s subordinates had been assassinated. They had fled the country and were seeking to further advance business with Japan – that must be their intent.

“The other day we had managed to set up a Fukuoka branch in Ropponmatsu. We have purchased a warehouse near Hakata pier to store our merchandise.”

“That’s perfect for you then.”

“For now.” Lau’s expression then turned hard. “.....Do you know of an organization called the Kakyuu Group? They are a multinational mafia based in Fukuoka.”

“Yes, of course.” Nitta nodded.

Just the other day his hitman had picked a fight with the Kakyuu Group.

“They had full influence in Fukuoka. Up until this point we had no place of our own. That is until recently when the top of the organization got assassinated, and they started to fall apart internally. If we take this chance now, we could overthrow them.”

I see. Nitta nodded. He could see their objective. They would like to use Saruwatari to chip away at the enemy’s strength and fortify their authority.

“According to rumor, your killer had cut down a hundred members of the Kakyuu Group.”

“.....Yes, more or less.” Nitta consented ambiguously and smiled wryly. It was incorrect in the aspect he did it by himself. It was rather exaggerated.

Seemingly pleased with his answer, Lau handed over a file to Nitta. Inside were the data for two men.

“They are Byeong-hui Kim and Takashi Unoyama. Both men are members of the Kakyuu Group.”

The data was composed of their profiles with their names, addresses, birthdates, blood type, and family listed as well as information concerning their daily patterns in activity. *They really looked into them.* Nitta was impressed.

“Please have these two killed. We will talk more after it is done.”

This was an employment examination. “Then if we succeed then we can sign a formal contract, am I correct?”

“Yes, of course. We will do it regardless of the price for it.” The price he had suggested was outrageous.

“.....I meant to ask.” Lau suddenly changed topics. “That killer – Saruwatari, was it? I heard he’s a friend of yours from high school, right?”

He really did his research. Nitta was further impressed.

“Yes. And what of it?”

“No, it’s nothing.” He said as though implying something. “I just hope this doesn’t get you into trouble. In this field of work emotions only get in the way.”

“.....I understand.” He was as wary as he had heard. “You must think I would prioritize my friend over my important clients, am I right?”

“I don’t mean to be rude.”

“There is no need to be concerned. Although he is my friend we have a business-like relationship. Besides -” Nitta pushed up his glasses and grinned.

“Killers are just tools to me.”

“I’m relieved to hear that.”

Lau smiled back to him and began pedaling the boat again. They arrived back to the dock and disembarked onto the land. They have finished their discussion. “I feel we will have good business with you.” Lau told him before leaving. *He’s quite a shrewd guy*, Nitta thought.

Once Nitta sat down on a nearby bench he called Saruwatari immediately. “Hello, Sarucchi? Where are you right now?”

‘The batting center.’ The more than usual irritated voice barked back. *He’s still there?*

“You know,” Lin pouted as he got into the passenger’s seat. “I have a show I want to see today.”

It was summer. It was hot outside, and he was not in the mood to be out much. If these hot and humid days keep continuing he would lose the motivation to do work. He wanted to spend time leisurely watching television in a room with air conditioning with one beer in hand – as Lin had just had a twentieth birthday a few days ago.

And yet Lin ended up being half dragged out of the room and was brought to the car.

“I don’t want to go on a trip in a car with you.”

“This ain’t a trip.” Banba said and handed over a file. “We got work.”

“Then even more so.”

They were going to eliminate the Kakyuu Group. In order to accomplish that they were going to assassinate Kakyuu Group members one at a time to weaken them. That was Banba’s objective.

“Lin-chan, this here is also your problem. We got the attention of that organization on us. If we don’t make a move now, we’re gonna be hunted by them forever.”

He had no words to counter that. After all the cause for all this was because of Lin. Lin had committed treason against the Kakyuu Group, and the Niwaka Samurai ended up getting caught in the mix for saving him from them.

“And we can’t let Sayuri-san get caught up in all this mess.”

Sayuri, who had assassinated the top of the Kakyuu Group under Banba's request, could be factored in as a potential casualty as well. She told them, 'I'll be away from Japan for a while,' and she left on a trip overseas. Banba seemed to want to clean up everything by the time she returned to Japan.

Naturally it did not sit well with Lin that the results from his carelessness had been pushed onto Banba to handle. "I get it." Lin muttered quietly. He opened up the file and asked him.

"So, who is the target?"

"Takashi Unoyama."

On the members list two to near three hundred people and their information were listed. Sayuri circled the remaining members and crossed out the deceased or convicted members.

"Unoyama, Unoyama, Unoyama....." Lin searched for that name from the list. They were all listed in syllabic order, and he found the name he was looking for on the third page. ".....Here he is. Takashi Unoyama. 45 years old.....Hey, it says his address is at Takeshita Yon-Chome. Isn't that in the complete opposite direction from where we're going?"

Banba was driving towards the eastern ward.

"We ain't goin' to Unoyama's home. We're headin' to the office. He oughta be workin' still at this hour."

Then he planned on not just taking care of Unoyama but the other underlyings at the office as well. He made a right turn before stepping on the brakes. They must have arrived.

"Change into these."

Once Banba had parked onto the side of the road, he handed Lin a paper bag. Inside was a conservative outfit including a white, women's T-shirt, a tight skirt, a navy blue jacket. Lin did as he was instructed to and changed inside the small spaced vehicle.

Banba on the other hand wore a business suit. He neatly fastened his necktie and wore a vest over his top. He wore a three-piece, grey striped suit instead of

his usual suit.

He asked Lin as he put on black shaded glasses. “How do I look? Do I look like an attorney?”

“You only look like a shady ass swindler to me.”

According to Banba, Unoyama had to settle out of court for a dispute he had with a regular bystander. So they had no choice but to approach him as attorneys. Today at nine o’clock he was supposed to have a meeting with an attorney for questioning. So they would not question where they were from.

Put simply Banba would pretend to be that attorney and sneak in with an innocent face to assassinate him, but there was one problem with that.

“What are you going to do for a weapon?” For Lin he had his knife-pistol. “There’s no way you can bring in your Japanese sword.”

“Local procurement.”

“.....Ha?”

What do you mean by that? Lin tilted his head to the side in confusion.

“I’m Tatsurou Myouken from the Myouken law office.Wait one moment, I can give you my business card.” After he named himself, Banba pointed to the person next to him. “This is my secretary Kobayashi.”

“I’m Noriko Kobayashi.” Lin bowed respectfully.

“I’m sorry for the inconvenience. We arrived rather early than our appointed time.”

“No, it’s fine.” Unoyama greeted them generously. He thoroughly believed they were an attorney and secretary. “Please come right in.”

There were six men, likely to be Unoyama’s lackeys inside the office. They appeared to be in the middle of work as they were all at their desks and making phone calls. On occasion they heard the suspicious terms such as ‘stock’ and ‘investment.’ They were all good-for-nothing phone conversations.

They stepped into the room and Lin was surprised. There was a Japanese sword adorned on top of the shelves in a corner along with other furnishings.

Ahh, I get it. That's what he means by local procurement.

Banba had known beforehand that there was a Japanese sword in the group's office. *He must have gotten that information from that mushroom-head.*

At the suggestion Banba and Lin took a seat on the ottoman. Unoyama sat down across from them. There was one lackey near the door and one next to Unoyama. They stood upright and proper as though they were military men.

"Well now, this is certainly a magnificent sword." Banba pretended to just notice it and turned his gaze towards it.

"Yes." Unoyama replied proudly. "It's a real one."

"The truth is I have an eye for antiques." Banba smiled shyly. "Could I see it up close?"

"Yes, of course. Go ahead."

Banba stood up and walked over to the shelf.

"This is truly marvelous....."

He exclaimed in admiration and closely examined the sword.

"Isn't it? A famous swordsmith from the Edo era had -, Gargh-."

It was one moment. Banba took the Japanese sword and unsheathed it. Before they could realize what would happen Banba thrust the blade into Unoyama's body.

"B-boss!"

His underlings' eyes popped out of their heads in shock. The other two were Lin's prey. Lin moved the same time Banba had went for Unoyama. Lin used his knife pistol to strike the other man's heart vertically. He then targeted the man standing near the door next since he was nearest to the escape route.

"Someone-! Ngh."

The man tried to call for help. Lin clasped a hand over his mouth and then slit open his throat.

In just a few seconds they managed to make three corpses.

“As expected of you.” Banba gave him a small smile as he shook off the blood from his blade. “You’re an excellent secretary.”

“What secretary?”

Everything was going according to plan. They were making good progress.

When they went to go to the stairs there was a knock and the door opened.

“Ah.”

There stood a henchman. He seemed to be an underlying low enough to just serve tea. He was holding a tray, which had three tea cups and saucers on it. Those must have been meant to Lin, Banba, and Unoyama.

“U-uwaaaa!”

The man shouted and attempted to run away. Banba threw the Japanese sword with a sidearm throw at the man’s back. The blade struck his body, and he fell at his spot.

However, the other henchmen in the office had taken notice. Three more men appeared from the opposite hallways. “What was that?!” They shouted.

“Leave the rest to me.” Lin stood a step forward.

They could not have a shoot-out in a corner of a quiet residential area. The men attacked Lin and Banba with short swords in hand.

“Alright then, let’s do it.”

Lin muttered and reaffirmed the grip on his weapon. It was reckless to fight in a narrow hallway with nowhere to run to, but there was no reason to head back into the room where the enemy would be ready to attack them. They were faster than the unprepared enemy with the advantage. Lin closed the distance between him and his opponent and thrust his blade between his chin and neck. He slipped beside the man to dodge the blood and then pushed the body to the other man. The man lost his balance from being hit with the body. Lin took that opportunity to attack and slit the man’s throat.

The last man had been taken care of by Banba during that time. With seven bodies in their wake, Lin and Banba hurried out of the office swiftly. Lin snorted for how smoothly it went. “That sure was easy.”

“Now then,” Banba got into the driver’s seat and said enthusiastically.

“Next is this man here, Byeong-hui Kim.”

He told him and pointed to the name on the list. It was another man listed after Unoyama on the syllabary ordered list.

“Ha?” Lin frowned. “We’re going to kill more people?”

He was ready to head home.

“.....I said there was a show I wanted to watch.” Lin sunk back into the passenger’s seat and sighed.

“You’re Byeong-hui Kim, right?”

At a high quality apartment building in Nishijin. Saruwatari called out to the man who just got out of a flashy sports car in a corner of a parking garage.

“.....Ah?” The man turned around and frowned. “Who the hell are you?”

He confirmed it – he had the same face as the one in the photo. There was no doubt it was him. His car plate number and the other information on the file matched.

When he took out his ninja sword Kim turned pale. “Under whose instigation are you-”

There was no need to answer. Saruwatari took a step towards him and closed the distance. He grabbed Kim attempting to escape by his neck and dragged him back. The man fell over, defenseless on the concrete. Saruwatari jumped on top of him and struck his heart with his blade, killing him.

He left a shuriken next to his body just as Nitta had instructed him to. It was to serve as proof to his client that the kill was his work. With this his job had finished. He then headed to the coin parking lot behind the station. Nitta was waiting for him in the car. “How did it go?”

“It was easy work.” Saruwatari snorted back.

“Next is this man.” Nitta handed him the data. “Takashi Unoyama. At this time he should be at the office in Hakozaiki.”

“From a Korean to a Japanese guy? There’s no consistency with the Kakyuu

Group.”

“They’re a multinational mafia.” Nitta started the car.

After that Saruwatari was taken aback, tilting his head in wonder when he visited Unoyama’s office at the front door.

The door is open. There sure are reckless. He frowned deeply. *Did they forget to lock it? No, that can’t be it. No one would be stupid enough to do that.*

Something may have happened. Cautious, he brandished his sword and stepped inside. Only silence greeted him.

He proceeded further in and a vivid red caught his eye. It was blood. A man was fallen on the floor further down the hallway. And there were more. Bodies laid in a heap on the floor.

“.....What the hell’s this?” He unconsciously voiced at the unexpected scenario. “They’re dead.”

The blood was not even dry yet.

Just what happened here? He stood there alone and looked around the office. Just then the intercom went off. Someone had come. After a moment the door opened. “Excuse me,” he heard a voice from the entrance. It was a man’s voice. He did not appear to be an enemy. “Is anyone here?” The voice was coming closer.

Saruwatari had no place to run or hide. He remained where he was and came face first to the visitor. The person who appeared was a serious looking man in a suit. He did not look like a yakuza member. He tilted his head and asked Saruwatari. “Where is Unoyama-san?”

“Who are you?”

“I’m an attorney. I’m Myouken from the Myouken Law Offi-”

The man spotted the bodies behind Saruwatari, and his face hardened. He then screamed and began to shake violently. *He must be a normal person if he’s that frightened.* Saruwatari thought.

“Ah, I ain’t the one who killed these guys.” He explained to him. “Even if I tell you that you probably won’t believe me though.”

The man ran away in haste. He did not appear to have believed him as he expected.

No helping it then. Should I kill him?

Saruwatari threw a four-pointed shuriken at the man's back. However, the shuriken veered off greatly and struck the wall instead.

"Ahh, I missed again. Dammit." He tutted.

The man had escaped. *Well whatever*, he shrugged. It would be bothersome to chase him down. Saruwatari then crouched down to the floor and inspected the bodies. Their wounds were all cuts made by a blade, all in vital areas. They were all efficient; this was an expert's work – likely someone in the same trade as him. So someone must have gotten to his target first.

Who did it? He tilted his head. Saruwatari searched around to thoroughly check for some clue. He saw something fallen next to the body and was taken aback. It was a blade covered in blood. Furthermore, it was a Japanese sword. There was only one person who would use this weapon.

"- Him, huh."

Was that man also targeting the Kakyuu Group? Recalling the ridiculous mask, Saruwatari smirked. "Seems this will be a fun job."

They parked the car in a slightly desolated area and headed to Kim's apartment on foot.

".....Hey, Banba." Lin stopped walking and pointed towards the building. "Look at that."

There was a crowd in front of the apartment building. The place was in a ruckus.

"The police are here."

There were several patrol cars parked there. They had set up a barricade tape to seal off the general bystanders from entering, and it did not look like anyone could enter the apartment building or the premises.

"Reckon' somethin' happened?" Banba tilted his head.

After looked through the crowd of curious onlookers, they spotted a familiar face in the police men group. It was the detective Shigematsu.

“There’s Shigematsu.” Lin pointed towards him.

“Ah, there he is.”

Banba exclaimed and waved his hand.

“Shigematsu-saaan!”

Shigematsu heard Banba’s voice, and his eyes widened in surprise. He then walked over to them. “What are you guys doing here?” Shigematsu asked after he moved them to an unpopulated place. “And what’s up with that getup? Are you changing careers?”

“We’re just out killing people.”

“.....Don’t make a comment like that in front of a cop like me.”

Shigematsu smiled bitterly.

“Did something happen? You have a case?”

“Yeah.” The detective nodded with a sullen expression. “There was a murder.”

He looked up at the building behind them and continued.

“A resident in this apartment building was killed in the parking garage. He was a Korean male named Kim.”

“Kim? As in Byeong-hui Kim?”

“Eh? Yeah, that was him.....” Shigematsu was stunned again. “Was he an acquaintance of yours?”

“Isn’t that the guy we’re supposed to kill?”

“.....Like I said, don’t say something like that so blatantly.”

Shigematsu laughed, exasperated at Lin’s statement.

“Kim was apparently involved in some dangerous business to pay for the government, so this must have been related to the mafia.”

There would be a good reason for him to be killed if he was the subordinate

of a criminal organization. It would not be strange at all if there was someone besides themselves who were targeting this man.

“What was the weapon?”

“We still don’t know specifically, but it was a blade.” Shigematsu replied before poking his chest with his thumb. “It was one blow to the heart. I think it was a pro’s work.”

And then there was this, Shigematsu added.

“There was a shuriken next to the body.”

At that one word,

“Geh.”

“No way.”

Banba and Lin grimaced at the same time.

“What’s wrong?” Shigematsu tilted his head, confused.

There was only one person who would use a shuriken. So he was targeting the Kakyuu Group too then?

“.....Seems this job is gonna be trouble.”

Lin nodded wordlessly at Banba’s comment.

The group office was attacked, and seven people were killed including the executive Takashi Unoyama. Another executive, Byeong-hui Kim, was stabbed to death in the parking garage at his place of residence. The news of their deaths was brought to Suzuki’s attention at roughly the same time. He had just dropped off Li and was about to head home himself when that happened. Suzuki received that report from his subordinate, and he held his head trying to grasp the details.

He made a U-turn and headed to Unoyama’s office first. When Suzuki arrived the bodies were still there; the men who were cut down remained fallen on the ground. The place was in a terrible state. The white walls and floor were dyed red from their blood.

“Including Unoyama-san seven people were killed.”

One of the subordinates ran up to him and began to give his report to Suzuki.

“And this was stuck in the wall.”

He told him and handed over a black object. It was a shuriken. *It can't be*, Suzuki thought. One man came to his mind – the one who fought the group on the building rooftop in Susaki City a few days ago. That killer. “.....His work then.”

“So it seems. There was also one found at the place Kim-san was killed at.”

The man continued his report.

“An attorney named Myouken who arrived to this office said he saw the culprit.”

“Show the attorney a photo of the killer in question and have him confirm it.”

His subordinate nodded at Suzuki's order and took off immediately. *This has gotten out of hand*. He sighed.

Unoyama was killed at his office and Kim was killed at his home. This meant their enemy had known the executive's homes and workplace. The enemy's objective was the higher ranking officers. If they made a reckless move, they would be killed. They should hide themselves and lay low for a while.

If he were to be honest with himself, Suzuki could care less what happened to the other executives. Their enemies could try to kill them off, but that would not affect the company. They would be fine as long as they had Li. First, he had to take Li and retreat to a safe location. Suzuki himself could follow his directions and move in his place.

Suzuki took out a cigarette from his pocket. It was a red and white package – the brand Renyi liked. After he died, Suzuki started to smoke. He put the cigarette to his mouth and lit it. He caught a whiff of the nostalgic scent. He closed his eyes and imagined him behind his eyelids.

Please rest assured, Ren-san. I will protect your brother at any cost.

He could not let himself make the same mistake twice. No matter what happens, and by any means possible he must protect that person. Even if it costed his life.

He spit out the cigarette with a stern expression. Suzuki took out his cell phone to report to Li.

Zhao met up with Yang after taking a two hour and a half flight to Busan and broke into the target's house. In Zhao's home country there was a boom in the child human trafficking business due to a rapid increase in population. This man they tracked down was a former human trafficking broker. However, he suddenly quit his job a few years ago and fled to Korea, bringing his family with him. He was living leisurely, washing his hands clean of the vicious business he was a part of as though trying to erase the past. The man persistently claimed he did not know anything no matter how many times they pressed him about his past crimes, but when he saw his daughter, bound, his complexion immediately changed.

Zhao pressed his sword to his young daughter's throat in front of him.

"I'll ask again. Don't answer without regret. You worked as a broker for human trafficking ten years ago, right?"

He finally gave in. The man hung his head and answered in a small voice. "..... Yes, I did."

Zhao narrowed his eyes and continued with his questioning. "You were in charge of a kid named Maomei at that time. Do you remember him?"

The man shook his head.

"I handled a few hundred kids in a year. I can't remember every one of them."

".....I see. That's unfortunate."

Zhao forced a shrug.

"If you won't seriously look into it, I'll have to take measures into my own hands."

He pressed the tip of the Lancet to the girl's thin throat.

"Stop!" The man's face contorted. He collapsed onto the floor and begged him. "Please stop.....Please don't do anything to my daughter."

"I don't know,' 'I don't understand,' 'I don't remember.' If you say something like that again, I'll gouge out your cute daughter's eyeball. Got it?"

The man paled and nodded repeatedly.

“Look up where Maomei is. There should be records left, right?”

“.....I-I got it.” The man did as he was told, opening up his laptop and began searching. “Do you know the man’s number?”

“Yeah.”

After Zhao read aloud the seven-digits, the man typed them in on the keyboard. There was just the sound of intent typing of the keys. After a few moments, the man’s fingers stopped. He seemed to have found the information. He read him the data displayed on the screen. “.....That man Maomei worked in Taiwan for two years after he left the institution. And it looks like he went to Japan after that.”

“Where in Japan?”

“Fukuoka. He entered the country almost three years ago.”

“.....Fukuoka, huh.”

“That’s nearby.” Yang chimed in. “We can arrive there in three hours via speedboat.”

Only three hours. He was within a stone’s throw from him.

We’ll meet soon. Mao.

Zhao smirked to himself.

“And then? What is he doing in Fukuoka?”

“He was sold to an organization called the Kakyuu Group. He is working as their exclusive hitman.”

“Kah-kee-yuu group?” He never heard of them before. “Yang, do you know them?”

“Yes, I believe they are an upcoming multinational mafia.”

“This is the most I can look up on him. I don’t know anything more than this.” After he handed over the printed out photo and data on Maomei, the man closed his laptop and let out an exhale. “This is enough right? Please give me back my daughter.”

His daughter had been wailing the whole time. Her shrill crying was greatly hurting his ears.

“.....Cut it with the squealing, shitty kid.”

Zhao bore his teeth and commanded that in a chilling voice.

“When I was your age I was hit with a whip when I cried. Don’t show your tears the enemy. Showing your tears is an act of weakness. That’s what they told me. I wasn’t treated like a human being. Here’s proof of it.”

Zhao showed her both of his arms. There were barcode tattoos on his upper arms. They were markings indicating he was just product.

Zhao turned towards the man and asked. “You recognize this marking too, right?”

“That’s -” The man swallowed upon seeing the tattoo. He hastily shook his head. “I-it doesn’t have anything to do with me anymore. I cut my ties with them.”

What ‘it doesn’t have anything to do with me’ bull crap is that? It made him sick. There was no possibility his past sins could be erased just by washing his hands of that business. The boys and girls sold away were put to work in manual labor at factories and mines or were forced to be beggars and prostitutes. There were occasions where they had to resort to robbery, theft and murder. If they could not be utilized they were cut up so their organs could be sold. No matter how much he tried, there was no escaping from that wretched life.

And while aware of that, this man sold off children in mass with ease.

“Say.” Zhao got up close to the girl’s face and whispered. “Do you want to know what grand job your pops did in the past?”

The man’s eyes widened. “Y-you wouldn’t.”

“How does it feel? The feeling of your daughter getting sold.”

Zhao smirked and reached for the girl.

“Stop-!” The man moved. He rushed over to his daughter with a desperate expression. Zhao swung down his sword and cut off his head. The girl’s wailing

voice grew louder at once. She was shrieking as though she had gone mad.

“I said to shut the hell up!”

He punched her in the gut, and the girl lost consciousness. He picked up her body with his right arm and handed her over to Yang. “Here. This is thanks for helping me.” This was in exchange to paying him in cash. “She has quite the pretty face. You could sell her for a high price to some rich, old geezer.

Third Inning

Top of Third Inning

He was sold with money. He was nine years old at the time.

Lin's family was poor. And additionally his father's debt that he accumulated from gambling placed a heavy burden onto their finances. It was difficult for his sick and frail mother to support her two children on her own. Even at a young age, Lin fully understood his family's helpless situation.

He knew a suspicious man frequently visited his household. The man was a buyer for the human trafficking business, and Lin had known he persistently tried to convince his mother to sell her children to him. Every day he tempted his exhausted mother. 'You can live easier if you let one of them go.' She stubbornly shook her head every time, trying to protect her children.

It was enough, he thought. He was fine with that. Seeing her doing that for them was enough. He was happy. It was because their mother loved them that much. So it was enough. He did not need anything more than that. So he thought.

Three days later Lin left home. He left in the middle of the night. Lin was pushed into a caged truck like cattle, and the vehicle the man was driving sped off. The vehicle kept going down the unpaved country road for half a day without a moment to rest. The bumps in the road were rough, and he could not help but get car sick. He held a hand over his mouth to stop from throwing up numerous times. Lin shook from the cold and sickness for the whole evening.

When they arrived to their destination it was already morning. Lin was exhausted from the long trip. He stepped onto the ground as he staggered and looked up to the building. A concrete outer wall stood towering over in front of him.

'This facility was formerly a prison that was remodeled for use again.' The man had said. It certainly did look like a secure building. It was surrounded by a high barbed wire fence, so he could not see what was happening inside. He felt a terrifying sensation as though the moment he stepped inside he could never

return.

‘Although it is a factory what is made here are people like you.’ The man laughed. ‘This is a human factory. It’s still an experiment, but they have decided to make weapons out of you boys this year. Starting today you will be taking special training in here for five years.’

Human factory, weapons out of boys, special training – the words he had trouble understanding fell one after the other out of the man’s mouth.

‘You will be studying how to kill someone. You’ll become a great murder weapon and be bought out to an underground organization. And for some of you who’ll become killers they will be others who’ll become spies or military soldiers. And then there will be some who’ll become terrorists.’

Lin was further dumbfounded by the man’s next words.

‘The day before yesterday a trainee died, so we were down one person. You were lucky. Otherwise you would have been cut up and have your organs sold, or you would have been sold somewhere to some rich pedo.’

Men wearing a deep green uniform stood in front of the closed durable, steel gates. They must have been the gatekeepers. The seller sent some sort of message to them. The gatekeepers nodded and disappeared into the building. After a few moments the side gate opened. Another man appeared. He was wearing clothes military-like uniform – the same as the gatekeeper, but the colors were different. From his hat to the tips of his boots, he was completely wearing a pitch black.

Lin looked up at the man’s face. There were shadows under his eyes. His cheeks were hollow and he looked sickly, but he was big and sturdy. He could not tell his age. He stood straight and proper, had fluidity to his gait, and had an excessively intimidating air to him. *Just what kind of person was he?* He was a mysterious, unsettling entity.

The buyer called that man the instructor, and that man handed him stacks of bills. He received three times the thickness of the stack compared to what Lin received. ‘Try your best out here,’ the buyer said after he stuffed the money into his pocket and took off.

The instructor, after looking down and observing Lin closely, signaled the instruction to follow him with just a glance. Lin passed through the gate after him. Inside the premises that was surrounded by its sturdy walls several buildings stood. They were all fairly old, deteriorating structures constructed of reinforced concrete. He could see corrosion and fissures on them too. There was a watchtower in the center, and he could see a man holding a rifle stationed up there. He looked like he was anticipating any intruders or escapees.

Nevertheless, Lin felt intimidated from the depressing impression each of the buildings gave him. They had gray walls, black doors, and muddled glass. *This is such an unsettling place*, he thought. The moment he stepped foot into the premises of the place he felt a strange suffocating sensation. The air was tainted, and the whole institution was covered in a gloomy atmosphere. And to make it even more eerie, the weather was terrible. Due to the exhaust fumes and yellow sand, the sky was cloudy. No matter which direction he turned towards there was just the outstretched scenery of a monochrome photo deprived of its colors.

‘You must adhere to what I say here. Is that understood?’

The instructor spoke. He continued on with that voice lacking intonation, as though it had lost all emotion in it.

‘Don’t place any trust in others. You can only trust yourself. That will be your lesson at this facility – no, it will be a lifelong lesson. Remember it.’

He said in a low yet audible voice.

Lin followed behind the instructor, lightly jogging up to him, as he pressed onward. Eventually they arrived to a certain location. There were two guards posted at the entrance, looking bored.

‘First cell building’ was written on the door. When the metal doors were opened there was a jail. Iron barred doors were lined up facing each other in the narrow hallway. There were children around the same age as him locked up in each of the isolated cells. They glanced over to them from their cages with fearful and weary expressions. None of them had any life to their visage. This place felt like a gathering of war prisoners. *Will I end up like them someday?*

Like a living corpse who has lost any goal in life.

‘You will constantly work in a group of two here. The person you will be sharing a room with will be your partner. You both will have joint liability for everything you do. You will work together, help each other out, and devote yourselves in training together.’

Although Lin felt an oddity to the instructor’s statement, he nodded.

‘This is your room.’ The instructor stopped right in front of the furthest cell. He opened the door and jerked his chin. ‘Enter.’

Lin stepped inside the cell as instructed.

‘Put these on.’ What was handed to him were plain sportswear he thought were prisoners clothes. Once he took them the iron bars clanked shut. The instructor left without further explanation.

The cell had a simple layout. There was an uncomfortable-looking bed and a toilet. It had small, iron barred windows, and in the center of the space it had a thick partition.

‘Hey there, newcomer!’

A red-haired boy poked his head from the other side of the partition. The other side of the partition also had the same arrangements. It seemed the wall between the two isolated cells was broken in half, making it a two-person room.

‘I’m Feilang. Nice to meet you.’

His roommate gave him a bright toothy grin. He had short red hair and had slanted eyes but a charming face.

Lin gave him his name and shook his hand. ‘Ah, um.....nice to meet you.’

‘Thank goodness you’re here. I was helpless on my own.’

He was an easygoing boy. Even though he was in this gloomy place, let alone locked into a cell, he had an awfully cheerful expression. Lin did not sense any sign of resignation, despair or pessimism like the other boys he saw earlier from him. He was unsure whether he fully comprehended the situation he was left in or if he just had an optimistic personality in nature.

The boy prompted Lin standing there idly, 'go on, sit.' Lin did as he was told and sat down on the hard bed. After Feilang sat down cross-legged he lowered his voice and said. 'The truth is the guy I shared a room with committed suicide.'

'Eh.' Lin unconsciously raised his voice.

'Shh,' Feilang pressed his index finger to his lips and chided to him. He then told him, 'he hung himself.' He then pointed to the latticed window installed between them. 'When I woke up in the morning, he was just hanging there.'

Now that he mentioned it, the buyer had brought up that one of the trainees died, leaving a vacant position. He did not expect the reason he was brought here was because of a suicide. Someone had died in this room. And a child about the same age as him, no less. Now having that thought placed in his head, he felt worse.

'He probably couldn't handle with the training here. He retired two weeks in.'

Just what sort of severe training was it that a suicide victim came from it? He trembled imagining it. His anxiety only heightened.

'Let's try our best for these next five years, partner.'

As though to blow away his suffocating feelings, Feilang gave him a wide smile.

Partner – that's right. I'm not alone. The instructor had said so. That they would work together, help each other out, and train together. Lin felt a little bit better hearing that.

Although he was the same age as him, Feilang talked like a grownup. Living here, he would inevitably grow into an adult earlier than necessary, as well. Just when he was about to ask him what kind of training they would have at this facility, there was the clamorous ringing of bells. It was like a siren going off to warn of a state of emergency. Surprised, Lin looked up at Feilang's face. He was calm. It appeared this was a normal occurrence.

'That's the signal that we're starting.' He told him.

The metal bars unlocked and opened automatically.

‘Let’s hurry up.’ Feilang jerked his chin. ‘We’ll get beat if we’re late.’

The room Feilang brought him to had desks and seats set up inside it – it appeared to be a classroom. All the desks were worn out from use, and they had a number written on the right hand side. Two desks were pushed together, making for ten groups in total. The twenty trainees all took a seat at their designated spots. Their seat was apparently arranged beforehand as Feilang told Lin, ‘our seats are here,’ and sat down next to him.

Their morning started with a lecture. They primarily studied languages. For five hours they sit packed inside the classroom learning various languages of other countries. There was a substitution in lecturers per language. There were many trainees who came from a poor upbringing, and some could not even read their native language. There were even some kids from Indonesia and the Philippines.

After they finished their Japanese course they would have break. Their lunch was bland and lightly seasoned. It was enough to fill their stomachs, but he could not say it was very tasty. Just as he was finishing up his food the bell rang again. Feilang told him it was the signal that break was over.

In the afternoon they all gathered outside. In the center of the field their instructor waited for them. The first part of their noon lesson started off with a marathon. They had to both work together and keep running; they could not stop at any costs. Any pairs who stop running would receive punishment. That was what their instructor commanded. The trainees assembled into two lines and started to run the outer perimeters of the field as instructed.

At first everyone ran at the same pace, but the lines started to break up after thirty minutes passed. Among them someone tripped over themselves and fell face down onto the ground. It looked like he twisted his ankle. He was unable to stand up. Another boy immediately ran up to him and tried to lend him his shoulder, but the boy with the twisted ankle could not get up. He sunk down where he was and burst into tears.

‘Don’t cry.’

At some point, the instructor had snuck up behind them.

‘Don’t show your tears the enemy. Showing your tears is an act of weakness.’

The instructor held a whip in his hand. And with that black rod he struck the boy relentlessly. He also hit the boy's partner next to him; both of them collapse onto the ground.

'Wha-what the.....'

It was a vicious scene. Lin muttered that, dumbfounded as he ran. Feilang grimaced beside him. 'Listen, just keep running. We'll be hit too otherwise.'

'But-'

'That's just how they do things here.'

The other pairs were not in the position to worry over anyone else right now. Lin's legs were also near their limit. His body was heavy. His movements had weakened as though he was being held down by chains, and he felt restricted. It was hard to breathe. He felt sick.

Eventually he stopped. He was unable to move himself even a little and he collapsed where he was.

'Hey, you alright?'

Feilang also stopped and peeked over at Lin's face.

'Don't stop.'

He heard the instructor's voice.

The next moment a shard pain ran up his back.

'O-ow.' Lin gave a small cry and grimaced. He knew right away that he was hit with the whip. *That hurt. This bastard. What the hell did he do that for?* He looked up at the instructor and glared.

'What's with that look?' The instructor sent back a cold glare.

Lin grit his teeth and made a fist. *This man is looking down at us.* The man looked down at them, believing the children could not do anything against him. Lin wanted to make him pay.

'You want to strike back at me? Just try.' The instructor glanced at Feilang. 'He'll get the same treatment then if you do.'

Joint liability – the instructor's words passed his mind. If he put up a

resistance right now, then he would get Feilang into trouble too. They would be beaten up like the previous kids.

Lin unclenched his fist while biting into his lip.

‘I’m sorry, instructor.’ Feilang bowed his head next to him. He then sat down in front of Lin. ‘Here, get on. I’ll carry you.’

‘Eh, but-’

‘Hurry and get on.’ He half-forcibly put Lin on his back. ‘At this rate we’ll both be punished.’

There were other boys lending their shoulder to their partner or pulled them by the arm among them. They were supporting each other to continue running. That was what the instructor had told them to do. They just had to keep running through any means. Feilang’s method was correct. He continued running quietly while carrying Lin on his back. And any groups who stopped during that time were beat mercilessly by the instructor’s whip.

‘.....I thought I was going to die.’

Lin dragged himself back to the cell and collapsed onto the bed. His whole body felt like lead. His abused legs were both burning in pain.

‘How could you call this training? This is just torture.Damn that instructor. I wanted to punch him so bad.’

After he complained about that Feilang chuckled. ‘Stop that. If they hear you, you’ll get in trouble.’

‘.....Say, Feilang.’ Lin rose up. He leaned over and told him in a small voice. ‘Sorry for today.You really saved me. Thank you.’

‘Don’t worry about it.’ Feilang laughed.

‘Still, you’re quite amazing Feilang.....I mean, you’re doing alright although you’ve been running all that time and even carried me.’

In contrast to Lin who was thoroughly exhausted, Feilang was lively. Lin admired that.

‘Give it two weeks and you’ll get strong.’ Feilang rolled up his sleeve and

showed him his biceps. 'The very beginning is really tough, but you'll get used to it soon enough.'

Although to catch up on the two weeks Lin missed would be rather difficult.

'Will I get used to it?'

He could not imagine himself running for hours on end without losing his breath after just two weeks.

'Well, more than that.' Feilang changed the topic. 'Why are you here?'

'That's.....'

Since he would be his partner here he supposed there was no issue letting him know. Lin decided to be honest with him. 'I needed money.'

Lin made a deal with the buyer. He had no regrets over it. When he told the man to take him he readily agreed. In exchange he gave him a large sum of money.

'My family is poor and with my father's debt we couldn't survive. So I came here in exchange for money. I lied to my mom and told her I'm leaving home for work.'

His mother did not press for details. He told her he was going to work in the city. He told her he would help someone he knew and work at a Japanese factory and live there. She was against it, but Lin's resolve did not waver. He wanted to help his mother even if it meant selling himself. He was set on it.

'I see.....Seems you had it rough at your place too then.'

Lin asked back. 'How about you?'

'I was sold by my parents.' His usual cheerful voice faltered. He casted down his eyes and continued. 'My mother was a prostitute. At first they had me held up to bring in clients, but a guy couldn't bring in potential regular clients and it costed them money for me.'

'That's-'

He could not believe it. That a parent would sell their own child.

'But I'm glad I came here.'

Feilang gave him a carefree smile. He was not acting strong; he truly believed that. That was the expression he had.

‘The training is tough, but we get food and we’re sheltered from the cold. This is much better than my life back then. So I’ll endure the training no matter how severe it’ll be. I don’t have an upstanding reason like you where you have your family or mother. I’m going to survive this for myself. I’ll use any means necessary. That’s what I think right now.’

He said it in an encouraging tone. Lin could see he was telling the truth in his eyes. He had not given up or grieved, he was looking ahead of him. Lin felt jealous of his strength.

Just then the bell suddenly rang and the fluorescent lights in the cell turned off.

‘What.....?’

‘Ahh, it’s time to sleep.’

Apparently that was the signal to let them know it was ten o’clock at night.

‘Just cover yourself with the blanket and close your eyes. The guards will be coming around. If they see we’re awake we’ll be put into the punishment cell.’

Lin was able to see his smiling face even in the darkness.

‘Just go to sleep and rest up. So that way you won’t have to be carried tomorrow.’ Feilang moved back towards his bed. Lin heard his voice from the other side of the partition. ‘Alright then, good night.’

‘Good night. Feilang.’

Lin also curled up onto the bed and closed his eyes. They would wake up early at six in the morning. They then were going to study from seven until noon. After that they would have lunch, and then they would have endurance training by running a marathon or have an intense muscle training exercise. He was already dreading tomorrow. It would be great if tomorrow did not come.

Somehow he could not sleep. He was strangely wide awake. He opened his eyes. At some point the lighting in the hallway and even the emergency lights turned off, and pitch dark blackness surrounded him. He could not see

anything. There was only the dark to greet him.

I want to go home, he accidentally thought.

Why am I being faint-hearted about this now? Didn't I choose this? It's alright. Five years will be done and over with before I know it. I'll meet my family soon. He could only tell himself that in reassurance.

I want to see mom. I'm lonely. I'm fine. It's hard. I want to get away. Contradicting emotions welled up inside him.

Lin held the photo of his family he secretly brought with him and closed his eyes again.

Bottom of Third Inning

The intense rays of the scorching sun shone brightly down onto the ground field on this day in late July. They were running in lines of two on the hot sand. Sweat was forming under the deep blue under shirt Lin wore. It was hot. It was a particularly brutal heat for the midsummer. When the sunlight was blocked slightly Lin would adjust the baseball hat on his head.

Now thinking about it, I did the same thing back then. He suddenly recalled. *That's right. I got in a line like this and did nothing but run.*

The Ramens had practice once a week. They would go out on a Sunday and rent out a baseball field for four or five hours. Fundamentally everyone was free whether to come or not, and as such it was rare for all the members to meet up. Today's participants were six people including their coach. There was Lin, Banba, Enokida, Shigematsu, and Martinez.

When they finished their running exercise they had stretches next. After they rehydrated themselves they all met up at the benches near the first base side and made a small circle.

".....Wonder if it's my age." Shigematsu muttered. He was breathing harder. He had both hands on his knees and took deep breaths in repetition. "It's been tough for me just to run for a little bit."

"Must be your age." Enokida gave him an unserved reply back.

Shigematsu glanced over to Lin, and seeing his calm expression he smiled. "As

expected, you young people are much more fit for this.”

“.....Not really.”

This much is nothing. Especially compared to what I had to do back then. Compared to that hell where I had to run continuously for two to three hours on end.

He recalled his training during his childhood. He was put through more than just marathons, he had to undergo various other trainings as well. Among them he had to do even long throw exercises. At the time he was dubious how being able to throw far would help him, but because of it he now was able to defend the shortstop and could throw the ball from the third base to first base without taking a step, so strangely enough it did end up helping him after all.

He finished his stretches including rotating his shoulders, neck and wrists and started practicing. He first began with batting.

I've improved quite a bit, Lin thought to himself. He originally started off just missing the ball when he swung, but now he was able to hit it. He even started to comprehend the more intricate rules of baseball as well. He understood the meanings of the terms ‘bunt’ and ‘squeeze’ now. And the amount of times he missed securing a ball that should have been easy to hit had lessened. More importantly, the number of times Banba got mad at him have decreased.

Their coach Genzo would always think up what they should do for practice every time. He would consider the number of people present and the weather to easily adapt for the session. After bunt practicing, they would do toss batting. Then they would move onto fungo, hitting drills, and base running practice.

Today we did quite a number of drills. Lin once again recalled his life as a trainee. He got distracted by the seething heat and ended up thinking of unpleasant memories.

It was not just Lin who was losing focus. With so few present their turns came around more often, making their practice harder. And under the blazing sun the Tonkotsu Nine moved more slow than usual. They tripped over their feet when trying to catch a ball they could usually follow. And they were blinded by the sun and missed the easy fly balls. Everyone went through their drinks fast as well. All of them were covered in sweat.

Just as they finished up with fungo, they ended up taking a break. Everyone retreated to take shelter in the shade at the benches.

“Damn it’s hot.....I feel like I could get heatstroke.” Martinez grimaced and gulped down his two liter plastic bottle. Lin took a seat on the benches as well and wiped himself down with a towel.

“I reckon’ we should teach Lin our team’s signs now.”

Genzo brought up.

“Signs?”

“They’re called block signs. For example, this.” Banba spoke up and showed him a pattern. His right hand gripped his left elbow, and then moved to touch the trim of his hat, his belt, his right ear, and finally his wrist in succession. “That just now was a sign to steal a base.”

“.....That’s difficult. I can’t remember that.”

The movements were too fast, and he barely managed to catch them with his eyes.

“Once ya remember the key, it’s simple.” Genzo said.

“Key?”

“Our team’s key is the belt. What ever spot you touch next is the real sign; all the others are fake. So if I touch my ear after my belt, it’s a sign to steal base. If I touch my hat it’s a bunt.”

“I see.....” He was not entirely sure if he got it or not.

“Then, what’s this?” Genzo moved his right hand. He touched his hat, wrist, chest, ear, belt, hat, and then his wrist.

“.....A bunt?”

Genzo grinned at his unconfident answer. “Correct.”

“And when anyone touches their chest after their belt it’s an end run.” Enokida added in.

“.....What’s an end run?”

“You don’t know an end run?” Banba’s eyes widened.

Enokida explained while drawing an image on the ground with a wooden stick he had picked up. “It means a hit-and-run. When we want a runner on first to run to next base, the runner takes off the same time the ball is pitched. The batter has to hit the ball no matter what. Even if it’s a very apparent pitch, at the very least they have to hit it and have it roll. Even if they hit a grounder to the infield, there is a high possibility the runner can avoid a double-play as soon as they start running. If the batter manages a good hit, the runner can make it from first all the way to third. Got it?”

“Well, one way or another.....”

“There is the risk of a double play if the ball is hit towards the runner and they can’t run back to base.” Shigematsu told him.

“How ‘bout we test it out. Lin you’ll be the runner. At first base, got it?”

Lin would probably learn it faster in practice. He did as Genzo instructed him to and headed to first base. Banba took up the position as the pitcher, and Enokida entered the batter’s box.

“When should I run?”

“The same time as he pitches it. When Banba moves you gotta run.”

Genzo made the sign in front of the benches. Hat, ears, belt, chest, hat – it was the sign for an end line.

Banba threw the ball. Lin took off, racing towards second base. However, Enokida had missed.

“Shoot.”

Lin immediately went back to first base.

“Hey, hold it! Dontcha run back!” Genzo yelled.

“But he missed!” Lin pointed to the mushroom-head man at the batter’s box.

“Once I give the sign you gotta run even if he misses. Dontcha worry ‘bout the batter or else you’ll be late.”

Stand back and watch, Genzo told him and took over his place as runner on

first. Lin took his place at shortstop. Banba made his pitch, Genzo took off, and Enokida hit the ball. It was a grounder for the shortstop. By the time the ball was caught Genzo was already in the sliding motion. Even if he tossed to the second baseman there was not a safe amount of time to get him out. Lin threw the ball back to first base.

“What the hell was that slide.....I didn’t think an old man like you could pull that off.”

“He still has it.”

Martinez and Banba marveled at the swift move Genzo made as though his age did not affect him.

“That just now was an end line. You got it?” Genzo asked him while knocking off the dirt from his practice uniform.

“Yeah, I got it.”

The runner was able to make it to the next base due to the set up. *So there’s this sort of strategy too*, he acknowledged. However, there was one thing that bothered him. “.....But if the batter doesn’t make a hit, then isn’t it possible to get three strikes with a double-play?”

There could be the worst result where the batter misses with three strikes and the runner gets an out.

“When that happens there’s no helpin’ it.” Banba answered him. “That’s part of baseball too.”

“.....Baseball sure is difficult.”

It was difficult and complicated. Lin had thought baseball was a sport where you just needed to hit the ball far away. In reality, they had to be on the defense side and run around a lot; it was bothersome.

“When you get the sign for an end line, you gotta place trust in your comrades and run. Believe that they will hit it.”

Trust in your comrades, huh.

He mused over Banba’s words in his mind.

Don't place trust in others. You can only trust yourself. That will be your lesson at this facility – no, it will be a lifelong lesson. Someone had told me that long ago, he recalled unwillingly. I wonder why. For some reason, I keep remembering the past today.

Saruwatari had finished his job and headed to the usual bar at dawn. It was in Konya City, at a corner in the northern Kokura Ward in Kitakyushu. He walked down the quiet street. There were no passerby around, and the restaurants and brothels lining the street were closed and had their shutters down. Although the late night drinkers had gone home and it was the time most people were sleeping, the darts bar Lady Madonna was still open.

After he entered and glanced at the ostentatious, female owner, she pointed to the center door with her index finger that was polished bright red. Saruwatari opened the door with the warning sign 'authorized personnel only' on it, and made his way down the stairs until he arrived at the floor designated for hitmen. An intimidating Venezuelan bartender was waiting for him. Saruwatari ordered a cola. There were no other customers around. Alongside one wall three human dummies were strung up. That area was the space for target practice. Saruwatari aimed for the one in the center and threw four-sided shuriken at it. No matter how many he threw, he could not get the shuriken to land as he wanted them to. He felt frustration build up.

I'm not good enough. I can't beat that man like this.

Sweat stained the hem of his tank top. For right now, he needed to train.

After he continued with practicing his pitches he heard a familiar voice.

"How about you stop that already. You're overdoing it."

When he turned around Nitta was waving at him from a booth. *Just when the hell did he get here?* He scowled. He might have been too focused on what he was doing and had not realized his presence.

Saruwatari stopped practicing and took a seat facing Nitta.

"Sarucchi, did you change your form a little?"

".....No, not really." He gave a short reply and placed the bottle of flat cola to his lips. "So, what's the deal?"

“How did killing Kubota go?”

Kubota was a name of one of the Kakyuu Group’s executives. Lau had acknowledged Saruwatari’s strength and immediately sent over another job. The target was Kubota. He apparently lived in a single home in Munakata City, and a few hours ago Saruwatari headed over to Kubota’s house. However,

“.....The target wasn’t there.”

Kubota was nowhere to be found. His car was gone as well. He must have known his life was in danger and left on short notice. *Then where was he hiding?*

“No one was there?”

“The target anyway.”

He could not say the house was completely empty. Someone was waiting for Saruwatari in Kubota’s living room. He was a man wearing a black suit and glasses with his front hair parted to the side. He appeared to be a serious company employee. When the man spotted Saruwatari he attacked him. Naturally Saruwatari made a counterattack though.

“I see.” Nitta groaned. “So he realized his life was being targeted and hired a killer to stand in for him.”

Kubota would not return to his home at present. There was a high possibility he concealed himself with other executives of the Kakyuu Group. They could not accomplish the job if they did not know their target’s location.

Saruwatari stifled a yawn, bored. “Ahhh, so boring.”

Suzuki had the executives, Li included, move to hotels and holiday homes. Naturally only the people themselves know of each location. Then they contacted Murder Inc. and hired five to six hitmen. They stationed one killer in each of the executive’s homes, awaiting for the trap to be sprung. And at last they had something. There apparently was a killer who infiltrated the executive Kubota’s home. When they rushed over there in the morning they found the traces of a struggle and the cut up body of the Murder Inc. employee.

“.....Dammit, he was killed.”

Looking at the dead body lying heavily against the sofa, Suzuki made a small tutt.

“Shall we look at the footage from the hidden cameras?”

Suzuki nodded at his subordinates suggestion. They connected the camera they set up in advance to the television and played the footage. What they saw on there was a familiar man. He wore a hoodie and had a black kerchief covering his mouth.

“This man-”

Suzuki could not see his face, but he knew: it was him. He stared at the screen as though engrossing himself into the image. On the screen the man was looking around the room. The killer from Murder Inc. held up a gun behind him and pulled the trigger. The man must have felt the killing intent as he turned around at once. The same time the gun went off, he dodged the bullet with the motions of an acrobat.

‘You’re not Kubota, are you?’ He had an intimidating tone to his voice. He threw shuriken he pulled out from somewhere with a unique form. He missed his target though. However, he pulled out his ninja sword while the other man went to dodge. It was one moment. The man closed the gap without any fear of the gun he had. He swung down the sword swiftly. After he robbed the other’s means of attack by severing the arm holding the hand gun, he then rotated his body so he could stab the man in the side of his neck. In just a matter of seconds the man had defeated the killer.

‘.....I’m still lacking.”

The man picked up the shuriken and whispered that to himself. The next moment, he disappeared from the screen. Nevertheless, Suzuki was shocked. *What incredibly strength. He’s different from the local professionals.* Suzuki swallowed. He watched the footage wordlessly for a few minutes. He returned to himself and turned off the television before making a call to Li. He picked up right away. ‘Is it more bad news?’

“Yes. There doesn’t seem to be any mistake that the one who killed Unoyama and Kim was this hitman.”

‘.....Is that so?’

“And one more thing.” Suzuki told him with a mix of a sigh. “Regarding the hitman next to you, they may not be of much use against him.”

He had one of the employees they hired from Murder Inc. follow Li as a guard. However, it was futile. From what he could tell from the footage, none of the men they hired could lift a finger against that man.

After he told him the whole event from beginning to end, Li also made a sigh. ‘This puts us in a difficult position.’

“I will make contact with a mediator and search for a skilled killer.” Suzuki declared, but he was unsure if that was possible. It would be impossible to easily find a killer more skilled than that man. They needed someone rumored to be in the top class of Fukuoka in terms of strength. Someone who could go up against him—

A certain killer suddenly came to mind: the Niwaka Samurai – the strongest killer of killers in Fukuoka. If it was him, he could possibly be able to defeat that man. However, the Niwaka Samurai was a wanted man by the organization. If he sought for assistance from that man, the executives would not remain quiet over it with their pride in question.

Suzuki’s one wish was cut off from him. It was impossible. There were no killers in this country that could keep that man in check.

.....Then how about someone outside of the country?

Translation Notes:

Feilang is the spelling provided in roman characters in the illustration of this novel, and I find that more concrete than the spelling the subbers provided in the anime adaptation. Any other Chinese names I double checked and researched the most likely spelling for.

Fourth Inning

Top of Fourth Inning

Four years since he entered the facility, Lin had grown a little bit. He had gotten taller and gained some weight. And recently he felt like the bed he slept on in his cell has gotten more narrow. His slim limbs and his ribs visible on his stomach had supple muscle. He persisted through the intense muscle training and honed himself not just in body and soul. He also had training to follow moving objects, discern poisons by scene, and train his senses. He was taught the necessary knowledge in order to kill someone as well.

Lin felt like he truly had grown strong. He was nothing like his past self who would break from just a two hour marathon. There was no doubt he grew strong. Nonetheless, in front of the instructor they all were just thirteen year-old children to him. No matter how much taller they all had gotten and got closer to meeting him in the eye, under his cold gaze they could not help but shake, and they followed his orders loyally. They still felt the difference in overwhelming strength. They were no match against this man. They could not oppose him. That was imprinted in their minds, Lin included, since a young age and that pulled at their hearts.

As such,

“Fight me with the intent to kill me.”

When he gave them that order they honestly wavered. They had an exam once a month at the facility. They called it the ‘monthly exams,’ and the curriculum was divided into subject and practical skill sections, most of which were application question they learned daily in lecture or during drills. The two trainees paired with each other would get their scores totalled together, and the most talented group with the best grades would receive a reward. Thus all the trainees desperately worked hard in studies and training.

There was one other reason they were so desperate. The results of these exams would greatly impact their future employment. If they did not do well with their grades they would be regarded as ‘a useless weapon,’ and buyers

would have no use for them. In the worst case scenario, they would be used as a sacrificial pawn and sold at the price of cattle to be sent head first onto the battlefield, rushing towards enemy soldiers with bombs in their arms. When the instructor told them that, the trainees had paled. Although, no matter what they do they would be employed into a dangerous career where they had a high chance in losing their lives on duty. Nonetheless, they considered the former as the better option than to receive the role as human bomb.

The four subjects of the exam were: 'education,' 'language study,' 'knowledge for assassination in battle,' and 'memory & observation ability.' Since they were separated from society, the exam covered various topics from general common knowledge so they could live and not stand out when they do return to society again to necessary skills including knowledge on world affairs, how to read and write various languages, and how to use weapons and learning the vital points on the human body for combat.

The subject they particularly paid attention to was 'memory & observation ability.' They were tested on how much information of a situation they could retain. For instance, after being shown an image and looking at it for thirty minutes, they would be asked, 'what is the color of the man's clothes running from the right? What is the plate number of the vehicle parked in the back?' They would be asked a vast amount of questions, and they had to answer them correctly. They even had one problem in the past where they were shown a photo of fifty men and their names for a certain time frame, and afterwards were shown a picture of one of the men and had to answer what the man's name was.

Once they finished testing all the core subjects, they took an exam in practical application. For that, they generally had three subjects: 'physical ability,' 'target practice,' and 'combat.'

'Physical ability' was also referred to as their physical strength test. They were evaluated on their speed, endurance, arm strength, output.

For 'target practice' they used various ranged weapons. They had used handguns to shoot targets at a shooting range, and other times they had to hit dummies set up in the distance with a rifle. They even had used a crossbow to shoot at animals before. Their time from setting up and taking position to

evacuating the scene was marked as well.

For 'combat' they fought another person in a fenced in area they could not escape from. They fought a variety of opponents, from ex-servicemen and martial art instructors to active boxers making black money in gambling matches. Their opponent for the combat exam this time was surprisingly the instructor.

"Fight me with the intent to kill me." He ordered them in his usual manner.

The exam began. They had a five minute time limit. Lin grasped the knife he received and quickly closed the distance. With the intent to kill – he reflected over the instructor's words and put force behind the weapon he gripped tightly. The other man was unarmed.

He swung the knife down and tried to make a slice on the instructor. However, he had predicted it and warded it off with the smack of his hand. He had three minutes left. He had no time. Lin started to get impatient. And he must have made himself open to an attack because of it. He made a huge swing, and an opening was made. The instructor was able to deliver in a kick. The hard tip of his boot struck into Lin's side. *Ow*, Lin grimaced. But that was it. He had grown used to the pain. He was trained to be accustomed to it.

He fixed his posture and attacked again. He used the blade in his right hand as a trap to punch the man in the face with his left. However, the man caught Lin's fist and twisted it.

"Finished."

That was the sign that the exam had finished. Five minutes had passed. It had ended with Lin unable to do anything against him.

"I believe I told you to fight with the intent to kill me?"

The instructor had a tone of despondency. Lin was disgraced by the results of the exam.

"You must have underestimated me as well."

At that statement, Lin had a realization. The man saw through him; that Lin did not take his order seriously. Lin had no intention of killing him. More

specifically he thought he must not kill him. He did not desire to kill anyone. He did not want to do it. Even as he had been taking classes for it he still rejected the act in his mind.

That was natural, he thought. Murder was a crime. The notion that they must not kill people could not simply be shaken off. No matter how many killing techniques they learned, he could not become a murderer. People could not kill others.

“The angle of your blade is important. Your attack just now could only graze the skin.”

You were taught a person’s vitals, right? The instructor shrugged his shoulders out of exasperation. Lin could do nothing but sit in silence.

The man turned his back to Lin and said one final statement. “If you hesitate for even an instant, you’ll lose your life. That is the world you’ll be living in from now on.”

And with that he had finished all his course exams.

The next day they received the results from their monthly exams. All of their subjects were marked from the top in order: excellent, good, average, below average, and poor. They showed their individual grades and the group grade that was averaged out between the points the two received. Lin’s grades was always at the top among the trainees.

“We did it. We’re the top group.”

Feilang called out to him as he was looking at his grades. His personal grade was in second place.

“You got ‘excellent’ for shooting? That’s awesome. I got ‘below average’ for that.”

“Didn’t you get an excellent grade for it last month?”

“It was because last time I had to use a crossbow. I’m not good with guns.”

It was a custom for them to compare each other’s grades.

“You’re really good at Japanese. I’m not good with that language. I don’t get that hiragana and katakana stuff.”

Their scores in language studies could affect which country they would be dispatched to.

“And while I’m good at English, you’re not as good with it. But if we team up, we’ll be fine.”

Definitely, he nodded in agreement. They both varied in what they specialized in and what they lacked skill in.

“That’s right. Hey, Mao.” Feilang gave him a grin. “When we get out of here, how about we work together?”

“.....Eh?”

For a moment he was bewildered. Lin was solely focused on leaving this place he never considered what to do afterwards.

Feilang spoke excitedly with his eyes alight. “We probably can’t do it right away, but we totally will meet up again. And when we do we can team up, save a bunch of money, and spend our day-to-day lives enjoying ourselves.”

“That sounds great.” Lin raised his voice. “We’ll be stronger than anyone if we team up.”

They would undoubtedly make a great team.

I can’t wait. I want to become free already. I want to go outside. He started to feel elevated. All the activities he wanted to do passed through his mind consecutively. *That’s right*, he recalled.

“When that happens you should come over to my house. We’re poor, so we might not be able to do much, but I want to introduce you to my family.”

Feilang nodded multiple times.

“I’ll come. I’ll definitely come to see you. I can’t wait.”

The two laughed, discussing their dreams excitedly. They could just continue to laugh like this from now on together. And to accomplish that, they had to pass the exams and obtain freedom.

“.....Our final exam is just around the corner.”

A half year from now they would have their final exam. If they passed that,

then they could leave this establishment.

“It is.” Feilang muttered.

All the trainees spent these five years yearning for freedom. There were even groups who tried to break out, got captured and put into the punishment chamber for it. Although they never returned.

There were more than a handful of times the harsh training made him want to try and escape. But each time he overcame the trials with Feilang. His presence was a huge support for him. They had helped each other out and managed to get through it. Feilang was his best partner.

“.....Thank you, Feilang.” Lin stated in a small voice. This was the first time he had said his thanks directly. He felt a little bashful. “I made it all the way here because you were here.”

“That’s the same for me.”

Feilang smiled back.

“Let’s give it our best for the final exam.”

He faced Lin and held out his right hand.

“Yeah.” Lin grabbed that hand and nodded deeply. “Let’s pass, together.”

“We’re going to pass, and the two of us are going to leave this place.”

They exchanged a handshake and made that vow.

This would be the end. Their five years here would soon come to an end. They managed to overcome the cruel training they were put through. No matter what the final exam had in store for them, they would pass without fail. It would be alright if they were together. Lin had that confidence.

Until that time.

Bottom of Fourth Inning

Again.

He had been thinking a lot about the past as of late. They were present enough he would see them in dreams. *Is this some kind of omen?* His heart

pounded in his chest. He woke up feeling unwell, and he could not shake off the feeling.

Banba was nowhere to be seen in the office. He must have went out. *He's probably at the batting cage*, Lin slumped his shoulders.

It was around the afternoon. He did not have any particular plans for the day. *Guess I could go out and do some shopping*, he considered and stood up. When he was like this, the best thing to do was to spend some money and get new items he liked to make him feel better, like clothes, shoes and makeup. He had enough money to buy as much as he wanted. He no longer had to limit himself on how much he could buy like before.

He went to change and took off his sweat covered T-shirt. He looked over his bare body. *I look so unsightly*, he thought to himself. He had numerous, old scars across his whole body. These scars he received during training in the facility.

There was one particular scar that stood out across his rib cage on his side – a mark made during a torture session. The establishment had them go through training to bear with torture in the instance they ever got captured by the enemy and could not tell them any information.

Now thinking back on it, it was rather extreme.

They were first shown a photo. On it had the profile of a certain man. They had to remember his name, age, address, career and other bits of information on him. No one else knew of its contents. After they were shown it, the trainee would be locked into a small room. They would be left alone with a torturer they hired and would be subjected to torture for half the day. The torturer would show the photo of the man and would try to force the trainee to give him the information they wanted with every possible method on hand. They would hit them, kick them, cut them and stab them. The torturer would hurt them using several incentives to get them to speak and have them get familiar with the different kinds of pain. They were to be conditioned to be able to control their fear and withstand the intense pain, no matter what the torturer may do to them or how much pain they would be inflicted upon with. That was the instructor's idea.

‘You must fight the fear, not the pain. If you feel fear, you’ll be more susceptible to talk. Don’t imagine it. If you imagine what they will do, then fear will take over you. Prepare for the pain and seize the torture.’

That was what the instructor had told them.

And even in that they were evaluated. They were graded out of a hundred based on how much they were able to endure it and on how much did they talk. He received nothing but hard training there, but there was nothing worse than that session.

Lin had loathed the instructor at the time. He was an inhumane, cold, sadistic man who did not bleed or cry tears. *When I leave here the first thing I’m going to do is kill you. I’ll have you put through the same activities you made us do and kill you.* So he swore, holding that resentment in his heart while enduring the five years of training, but ironically enough what he learned from the instructor has ended up being useful to him. Even the torture training.

As he was changing, Lin suddenly had a thought. *Could I beat the instructor now? Would I be able to kill that man as a lone wolf killer?* He wanted to give it a try. He oddly enough had the confidence he would not lose to him. He pondered over whether he should have Enokida find that instructor’s whereabouts and smiled to himself.

Maybe it was because he thought of him that he ended up meeting with Enokida when he headed out. He spotted the silver mushroom-head in Tokyu Hands in JR Hakata City. He knew it was him right away. He was wearing a gaudy outfit as usual. He had shopping bags in hand and was about to take the elevator.

“Hey.”

Noticing Lin, Enokida raised one hand cheerfully in greeting.

“You shopping?”

“Yeah. I’m out buying materials for a new model.”

“New model for?”

“A redback spider keychain for the redback spider transmitter. And then a

redback spider hand grenade and a redback spider plastic bomb. When I'm finished making those, I'll give some to you."

".....No thanks. I don't need them."

A grenade and a bomb? He makes even those things? Lin shrugged his shoulders. *Does he plan on changing careers and become a weapons dealer or something?*

"Ah, that's right."

Enokida suddenly remembered something.

"Do you know of a man named Yang?"

Lin tilted his head in response. "Yahn?"

There were a ton of people with that name in the country. However, there was no one he knew that he could think of with that name.

"No, I don't."

"Then never mind." Enokida left with just that.

It took them less than three hours to get from Busan to Fukuoka on the high speed jet. When they arrived in Hakata bay that morning they decided to go around to all the informants to try and find out about Maomei and the Kakyuu Group. Zhao met up with Yang again in the evening. They were at an Asian restaurant that was about a five minute walk from the subway at Ohori Park Station.

"Did you manage to get anything?" Yang asked first after their nasi-goreng with sunny-side-up fried eggs on top and their fresh, red-colored cocktails were brought to them.

Zhao shook his head. He ran around Fukuoka City and tortured two informants for any intel for half the day, but he was unable to gain any noteworthy information.

"It seems Maomei has changed his name. Looks like he's going by Xianming Lin now. Although I was expecting him to at least have changed his name." Zhao only knew that about Maomei. He sighed as he stabbed the egg yolk with his fork. He wasted precious time. He killed the informants that were of no use to

him.

He then exchanged looks with Yang. “And? How did your end go?”

“I have figured out a lot of things about the Kakyuu Group – the organization Maomei was sold to.”

Zhao leaned forward and listened closely to what Yang had to say.

“It seems a few executives in the Kakyuu Group have been killed in succession. A few days ago the top head of the organization was assassinated. It appears an opposing organization is using the opportunity to plan on annihilating the Kakyuu Group.”

“Really?”

“And right now the group has been reaching out to the mediators in the area and are searching for a skilled hitman to hire. This is in an attempt to compensate for battle strength and to fight back against their enemies.”

“Wait a second.” Zhao tilted his head in confusion. “Maomei is employed by the Kakyuu Group, right? Even though they have a specialized killer working for them, why would they try to hire another one?”

“Wouldn’t that mean Maomei is insufficient to them?”

Insufficient?

Feeling as though he was the one who got rejected, Zhao turned sullen. “There’s no way that’s it.”

I can’t accept that. We went through hellish training and were made to be elites. There’s no way he’s insufficient.

What’s the meaning behind this? Zhao thought over the possibilities. Could it be that Maomei was killed? Is he no longer in this world?

No matter how much he pondered over it, he would just be wasting meaningless time. The fastest way to figure it out was to directly ask someone from there. “Did you make any contacts with anyone in the Kakyuu Group?”

“Of course.”

Regardless of the reason, if the Kakyuu Group was searching for a killer then

that would be most convenient for him. In exchange of helping them out, he would just have them give information on Xianming Lin.

“Tell them that they have a skilled killer.”

“Yes, right away.” Yang consented. He then mentioned as though he just recalled it. “.....Ah, yes. Sir, take this. This may be of some use to you.”

He told him and took out a black shaped object from his pocket.

“What is this?” Zhao questioned.

When he inspected it closer, he saw it was a spider. However, it did not move.
Is this a dead one or a fake?

“It seems to be a listening device and transmitter. I received this from an informant I met with earlier today.”

Thoroughly inspecting it, he saw a tiny switch on the side of the spider. The power was currently on.

“.....I see.”

The place Banba met with Enokida at was a ramen shop in JR Hakata City.

“That’s right, the fireworks display is gonna happen soon.”

Banba muttered to himself, looking at the poster hung on the wall. He read through the details posted on it. The date of the event would be on August 1st from 8 pm until 9:30 pm. It would be held at Ohori Park. They apparently planned to fire 6000 fireworks this year.

“Oh yeah, the one at Ohori, you mean?” Enokida was sitting facing towards him and looked up to glance at the poster. “Looks like there’s going to be a crowd of 450,000 people.”

“Whoa. There’s quite the crowd every year.”

The city held the largest fireworks display in Fukuoka, and every year on that day the roads and transportation facilities were packed when commuting.

“I wasn’t able to go to the Yamakasa this year, so I at least want to see them fireworks.”

Just as Banba muttered that keenly their order had arrived. They had ordered

two roasted pork fillet with ramen. Enokida began the discussion just as he began eating.

“Anyway, about that case.”

Banba had Enokida track the whereabouts of the Kakyuu Group’s executives after they went into hiding, but it seemed Enokida was having difficulty with this case for once.

“My spy was killed.”

Enokida had a few information providers. He had one of them sneak into the inner workings of the Kakyuu Group to obtain information.

“I suddenly lost contact with him for a period of time, and then just recently he was found in the ocean. You saw that newspaper article about it right? It the body they found in Hakata Bay that died from poisoning.”

“Yeah, now that you mention it.”

Banba felt like he saw an article on that recently.

“On top of being severely tortured, he was also put into a gas chamber. And they discarded his body in an easy spot to find him.”

“So they did it for show.”

They probably did it to threaten other traitors in their midst, ‘this is what happens when you betray the organization.’ And it had an effect.

“I have another helper there too, but he’s not in the position to do anything reckless at the moment. They’re being very cautious. It’s going to be pretty dangerous to find out the locations of the executives right now.”

That meant his Kakyuu Group executive hunt would be delayed.

“According to his information, a man named Suzuki is responsible for all of them. It was his suggestion to have all the executives to go into hiding.”

“I reckon’ if I should just target that Suzuki then. He oughta be in contact with them.”

“Probably.” Enokida agreed.

“Tell me if you hear of any movement from Suzuki then. I’ll tail him.”

“Okay. Well, they seem to be busy dealing with an organization called Shou Wan recently, so they probably don’t have time to deal with you guys.There is another suspicious figure around though.”

“Suspicious figure, you say?” Banba put down his chopsticks and glanced up to Enokida.

“I had a client named Yang who was looking for information on Lin-kun.”

“Yahn?”

“This is him.”

Enokida showed him a candid photo of the man, but Banba did not recognize him.

“Who is this fella? Is he someone from the Kakyuu Group?”

“Apparently not. He wanted to know about the Kakyuu Group.”

What? Banba tilted his head to the side.

If he was searching for information about the Kakyuu Group, then Yang must be someone from an opposing organization. Either way, Banba could not ignore him if he was searching for Lin.

“Do you know where that Yang fella is?”

“Naturally.” Enokida took out his laptop from his bag. He typed on his keyboard and brought up his location with the GPS.

However,

“.....Ah.”

Enokida’s fingers suddenly came to a stop.

“What’s the matter there?”

“The transmitter switch has been turned off.”

“Oh no.”

It seemed he realized he was being tracked.

“This guy is good. He’s sharper than I gave him credit for.” Enokida made a toothy smile. “He was just in Ohori a little while ago, but the log cuts out there.”

It could not be helped then; for now he had no choice but to give up.

“Well, Lin-kun should be fine regardless.”

Banba could not nod at Enokida’s words. “Nah,” he mumbled before slurping his noodles.

“Are you that worried about him? You’re overprotective.”

“.....He’s been actin’ a little off recently. He’s been dazin’ off.”

“Really?”

“It’s like he’s lost in thought.”

Banba made a small sigh before biting into the roasted pork.

A certain man made contact with Suzuki. It was about an hour ago. It was a Chinese man named Yang. A mediator he was acquainted with called him and told him, ‘there are a lot of skilled hitmen that are active in China, so how about hiring them?’

A skilled foreign hitman – his wish that should not have even been granted happened in the most convenient time.

They met up at a shot bar in Nakasu. When Suzuki arrived, Yang had already taken a seat in a booth and was drinking his beverage. He was red in the face, probably due to the intake of alcohol.

After he ordered his drink, Suzuki began to discuss the job.

“Is Zhao capable?”

That was the most crucial point he had to know.

“Of course. He is young but strong.” Yang nodded with confidence. “He was raised to be a weapon to kill people since he was nine. Or more accurately, he is a factory-made product.”

“A factory-made product.....?” Suzuki said that to himself in a murmur.

A factory. He had heard a little bit about it through rumors. It was a training facility that produced soldiers for hire in a certain ministry in China. They also called it the boy weapons factory. “From what I recall, that place gathers poor children from around the world and has them undergo training, right?”

“That’s right. Their main interests are boys around ten years of age. And the duration of the training is five years. Only those that pass all the curriculum will be sold to an organization needing their power through a specialized broker. Zhao is also from that facility. Although he is a freelance killer who has never joined any organization in particular. And I work with him as his mediator. Even during his years as a trainee, Zhao was quite talented, but he really has improved since the graduation exam. I believe his work will more than satisfy you.”

If he is talking about him that much, maybe we should give this man a try, Suzuki considered. Although, even if he were to turn down the offer there would be no other options.

“By the way, he wants to make an offer instead of pay.”

“What offer?”

What does he mean? Suzuki frowned. *He doesn’t want money?*

“He wants to make a bargain. Zhao is searching for a certain man. If you are willing to aid him in that he will kill any number of people for free. That is what he told me.”

Yang gulped down the remainder of his drink and made a bitter smile. “He’s a mad man. Pretty much everyone who leaves that factory is crazy. If they weren’t, they wouldn’t have spent five years in that hell of a dump.”

“Is that the case.....” Suzuki did not quite grasp his meaning once more.

“There is a certain reason for Zhao’s upbringing. He was raised rather rebellious. If I can describe it in other words, it would be he is extraordinarily talented.” Yang made a fishy smile.

“What do they do in that factory?” He was intrigued. Just what kind of coarse environment was the establishment for young boys to go mad in just five years?

“Put simply, it’s brainwashing and corporal punishment. Under the name of training.”

Yang spoke with a calm expression.

“In the first two years they build up their basic physical strength. As well as

their mind, of course. In order to work globally they are taught English, Japanese, and Spanish from a young age. After they strengthen their body, they move to on-hands training. They even learn about weapons.”

“.....I see.” Suzuki murmured. He could not form any other words to it. It was a world he could not imagine – one where very young boys were all gathered and had to undergo harsh training to become hitmen.

“In the facility they usually worked in teams of two. They are put in the same cell and spend time together for twenty-four hours. They are brought up together, distract each other from their loneliness, and support each other to push through the cruel training. They share one’s lot together and have dual liability. The other teams are rivals, so they did not intermingle much. They only had their partner they shared a room with to talk to as well as their sole ally.”

Yang was quite loquacite. It did not seem to be because of the alcohol. He continued to talk skillfully.

“And then after five years they have their graduation exam. Only the ones who pass this test are allowed to leave the facility. The ratio of those who pass are fifty percent. It’s a cruel exam.”

“Fifty percent.....One out of the two then?”

“Yes, one out of the two.” Yang nodded. He then began to chuckle. “Naturally it has to be one out of the two.”

He smiled in an unsettling way.

“After all the cellmates fight to the death.”

“What?”

When Suzuki questioned that, Yang repeated what he said. “The children fight to the death.”

Suzuki shivered. *This is a twisted world*, he thought. He could not say he was in the same position as them.

Yang smiled more and stated.

“They have to fight the partner they share a cell with and pass when one finishes off the other. That is their final exam.”

Fifth Inning

Top of Fifth Inning

‘Starting now the final exam will begin.’

The instructor’s voice coming from the speakers was even colder than usual. It was time. The final exam would begin. And yet the doors to their cell remained closed. The trainees were still all locked into their private cells.

After a while they heard the sound of several footsteps. The guards came to their cells and tossed in weapons between the bars including knives, short swords, axes, and clubs. The various kinds of weapons thrown into their room clanked in disarray between Lin and Feilang.

What the hell is this? What is going to go on? Lin tilted his head, confused. He frowned dubiously and looked over towards Feilang.

‘There is no time limit.’

The instructor’s voice vibrated through the entire cell from the microphones.

‘The one who kills the other first will pass.’

Those unbelievable words came from the speakers.

“.....Wha-?”

Lin doubted his ears.

“He’s kidding, right.....”

The one who kills the other first will pass. That was what the instructor said without question. The doors were locked shut. The two trainees were trapped inside, and they were provided with weapons.

Wait. They want me to kill Feilang? That’s the final exam?

Lin froze at the unthinkable situation. He could not believe what the instructor had said. He did not want to believe it. At the same time he finally understood. So that was the meaning of what he said. Lin finally realized the true nature of that unsettling feeling from that time.

He thought it was strange. When he came to this facility the instructor had told him: ‘Don’t place any trust in others. You can only trust yourself. That will be your lesson here.’ He then had added, ‘you will work together, help each other out, and devote yourselves in training together.’

Those statements clearly contradicted each other. They should not trust others, yet they had to support and help each other out. In truth, the instructor had pointed to them the answer at that time. The trainees would continue to fight all alone. They would be reserve troops with no connection to people. And yet the cell was a room for two. They had their daily lives working together as partners; working together and with joint liability.

All of that was for this purpose then? Lin was taken aback. That certainly was the meticulous and cold thinking that man would do.

“Wha-what kind of joke is this.....?” Feilang had an awkward smile. His face had contorted and gradually became strained.

‘The method is up to you. You can use any weapon out of the ones provided. Now then, begin.’

And then the broadcast cut off.

‘Don’t kid with us!’

Feilang turned towards the outside of the cell and yelled that. He grabbed the bars and bashed against them.

“Are you saying we have to kill each other?! Don’t kid with us!”

However, no one replied. The guards in the hallway merely looked down at Feilang raving at them with cold gazes.

“.....Dammit.” Feilang punched a fist into the bars and collapsed. “Are they serious about this.....”

Lin stood dumbfounded as he looked at his back. Feilang was his one friend who had helped him throughout the whole ordeal. He was the first friend Lin had, and someone he viewed like a brother. *I have to kill him? I had to go through all of that for five years just to kill him? To do this bullshit?* Rage boiled up inside him. His thoughts were scattered.

He got a hold of himself and shook his head. He could not do it. He could not kill Feilang. He did not want to. He absolutely would not. He made a promise that they would leave together.

“Feilang.”

Lin spoke up to him as the other trembled.

“We gotta survive this, together.”

He proclaimed firmly.

Feilang turned around and looked up at Lin. “.....But how?”

“We’re going to get out of here.”

Lin picked up an axe out of the pile of weapons tossed to them.

“We’ll break the bars with this. With our sizes we can slip through the window.”

Lin swung the axe. He swung it down at the metal bars multiple times. There was the pounding, metallic sound. *Break, break, break!* He put extra strength behind his attacks and smashed the axe against the bars. They had to get out of here. No matter what. Lin continued to swing the axe down desperately.

It was then. Suddenly there was a sharp pain in his back.

“Ow-ah-”

Lin’s face contorted in pain, and he turned around. Feilang stood behind him. He was holding a blade in his hand. That blade was covered in blood.

“Fei, lang.....?”

Lin’s eyes opened wide in shock. Blood dripped down his back and onto the floor. He staggered and fell to his knees.

“You-”

Stabbed me?

He could not believe it.

Feilang tutted in front of the dazed Lin. “.....Ah damn. You moved, so I missed your vitals.”

“Wh-why-”

Why would you do this?

“Why, you ask? This is part of the exam, you know?” Feilang laughed at him.

Lin stared at him, uncomprehending. He could not wrap his head around it.
Just what is he saying?

With Lin confused and unable to move, Feilang sneered at him.

“I’ll tell you since you’re so pathetically unaware. I told you before that my other cellmate committed suicide, right? It actually wasn’t. I killed him. I wrung his neck and hung him.”

“Wha-”

Feilang continued as he twisted the blade with his hand. “I coincidentally heard the guards talking about it. That the cellmates had to kill each other for their final exam. So if I finished off my partner, I would pass. So I killed him and showcased it as a suicide. Then I should have been exempted from the exam.”

Instantly the smile fell from Feilang’s face. He looked down at Lin with a cold glare.

“And then you arrived. To fill in a vacant position. I thought it was bullshit. Just how much trouble do you think I put into that? I considered killing you too, but I decided against it. If two of my partners committed suicide, then I would be suspected after all.”

“Yo-you’re lying.” Lin grimaced and shook his head.

He did not want to believe it. That Feilang would try and kill him. His one and only friend he considered to be his partner.

So everything was a lie? His smile, his words, and his promise too?

“.....I could laugh for how easily you fell for it. You’re not suited to kill people.” Feilang turned the tip of the blade towards Lin.

And so, he added.

“I will survive and become a magnificent killer in your place.”

Feilang made his attack. He grabbed Lin by the shoulder and pushed him onto

the ground. He lifted up the blade in his right hand high into the air and laughed. "Goodbye, Mao."

Bottom of Fifth Inning

"Lin-chan. Lin-chan!"

Lin was grabbed roughly by the shoulder, and his eyes immediately shot open.

".....Are you alright there?" Banba's face was right in front of him. "You looked like you was havin' a nightmare."

He looked around the room. To his right was the TV and low table, in front of him was the partition screen, and to his left was the cupboard. It was a familiar setting. Lin was lying on the sofa in the Banba Detective Office.

It was just a dream. He made a heavy sigh.

"You alright?" Banba asked again.

".....Yeah." His voice was hoarse. "I'm alright."

He was covered in sweat. He was not sure if it was from the summer heat or from the nightmare. His whole body was drenched, making him feel uncomfortable. His breathing was ragged and his heart thudded hard in his chest.

"Did you have a bad dream?" Banba peered closely at Lin's face and asked him that.

Yeah, that's right. It was just a bad dream.

Even though it was just a dream, it had unsettled his heart greatly. The events from that time were surprisingly vivid in his mind. The events of that day that should have been forgotten. It was imprinted into him, and he could not escape from it.

".....I'm going to take a shower."

Lin pushed Banba aside and stood up from the sofa. He remained silent as he headed to the shower room.

Even now his heart was still pounding. He put his head under the water to try and calm down and washed off the sweat. *It'd be great if I could wash away the*

memory of that day too, he thought. Even now that event at the factory which happened six years ago – his friend's betrayal – had left a deep scar into the young Lin's heart.

Long ago he dreamt it often. The memory had followed him for many years. He thought he had finally forgotten about it. He believed he was finally released from the curse.

The shoulder Banba grabbed still burned. It burned as though it had gotten scalded. When he looked at it there was a handprint on his upper arm. Even though Lin was grabbed so hard and his name was called numerous times, he was unable to wake up from his dream. He felt ashamed. *Was he that captivated by that event or had his senses dulled?*

This was pathetic. I'm a failure as a killer. If by the chance it had been an enemy and not Banba – as soon as he imagined it he stiffened. I would have easily been killed. I could have died without even realizing it.

“.....I've been far too out of it lately.”

He brushed back his damp hair and whispered that to himself.

‘Don't let your guard down. You must not trust others. You can only trust yourself.’

As the instructor's words passed through his mind, he suddenly had a thought.

If it wasn't Banba but an enemy? What am I saying? In the first place, I don't have any proof that Banba is an ally.

When he thought over it more thoroughly, Lin did not know anything about Banba. *Where was he born, and how was he raised? Why is he working as a killer? What was his objective? And why did he save me at that time?*

He put trust in a man he knew nothing about and spent his days with him. Just because Banba was a little kind towards him Lin opened up to him, making him defenseless.

Isn't this the exact same scenario as six years ago? Do I want the same thing to happen again? Lin questioned himself and shook his head. “.....Am I an

idiot?”

He should be more weary of him. It would only be a matter of time for Banba to suddenly turn his sword towards him one day. He lived in that sort of world.

The seed of doubt began to sprout. *I might be betrayed again. Just like with Feilang. I can't stay here any longer.* Lin suddenly became frightened. He was assaulted by the crippling sensation as though he would lose his footing beneath him. *I have to get out of here. Before I'm betrayed again.*

He had the opportune moment. He turned off the faucet to stop the water. After he changed clothes, he did not find Banba anywhere in the office. Banba had left a note on the table. ‘I went out for a job. I may be late.’ He only wrote that in explanation. He must have left already.

That was perfect for Lin. He could leave without being scrutinized. Once Lin gathered his belongings, he wrote on the back of the paper: ‘Thanks for everything.’

Suzuki had waited fifteen minutes while drinking his coffee at the designated meetup place – inside a cafe with air conditioning on the southern side of downtown Tenjin – before the other man appeared.

“You’re Suzuki, I take it?”

The killer named Zhao, whom Yang introduced him to, was younger than he expected. He seemed to be twenty or perhaps still a minor at youngest. *Will he be enough?* Suzuki got a little bit anxious.

“Will this kid be enough? That’s the face you’re making.”

Once Zhao took a seat facing him, he stated that. Suzuki cleared his throat and laughed.

“No, absolutely not.....” Having been seen through, Suzuki faltered unconsciously. He looked over the man Zhao closely again. He was not very large but of medium build. He had red, short and ruffled hair. His features were neatly arranged, but he had a scar running over his left eye vertically. When Suzuki observed closely, he could see the color in his left eye was slightly different. His right eye was brown, but his left eye was a dull black. Maybe it was an artificial eye.

His clothes were simple. He wore a tank top with his shoulders bare. There was a barcode-like tattoo on his upper arm. He wore skinny jeans and rugged designer sneakers. At first glance he looked like any ordinary young male, but Suzuki felt a peculiar air about him.

Suzuki had heard Zhao had a twisted personality, but he was surprisingly expressive. He would chuckle regularly and would grin when he said something. He even would raise his voice and smile. However, his eyes were not smiling. Zhao was an unsettling person who was difficult to read into his true feelings.

Finished his re-evaluating him, Suzuki brought up the main topic. "Is it true what he said?"

"Who said what now?"

"About the payment. You're fine with a favor instead with us?"

"Yeah."

Zhao nodded readily as though disinterested in the matter.

"Give me as many as you want. I'll kill any number of people. However, you have to accept my condition." He took Suzuki's coffee and downed it before continuing. "I want you to help me look for someone."

"Look for someone?"

Zhao took out a photo and showed it to him. "This guy looks familiar to you, right?"

It was the photo of a young man. He was still a child. He looked like a boy around fifteen or sixteen years of age. He had long hair that reached his shoulders. He had unique features, but Suzuki did not recognize him. He shook his head. "No, he doesn't."

At that, Zhao's expression changed. He did not appear to like Suzuki's reply and frowned, displeased. "You must have seen him. He's a killer you guys hired."

Although he said that, Suzuki truly could not remember him. *Was this man among the killers we hired from Murder Inc?* No, he saw all their faces, but there were no young boys among them.

Then maybe he was hired personally by someone.

“It’s not like I hired him, so I wouldn’t know.”

Zhao gave a sigh and asked in a slightly irritated voice. “Nonetheless, you can figure it out if you look into it, right?”

“Probably.” If Suzuki checked with most of the executives, he should be able to find the boy right away.

“I want to meet this man. Find his employer and call him up. If you will let me meet him, then I’ll work for you guys as you wish. And of course, I don’t need payment for it. That is my condition.”

“.....Why do you want to meet this man?” *Just what reason does he have to go this far for it?*

“He’s an old friend of mine. We got separated about six years ago, and I’ve been searching for him this whole time. I got a lot to talk to him about.” Zhao made a profound smile.

“Alright then.” After Suzuki thought over it for a few moments, he agreed. *It’s not a bad deal, no, actually it’s the best deal. His wish is simple. They just have to present him with some killer. There are no risks for them.*

“However, before that-”

They needed to test this Zhao to see if he was truly capable. They would rather not be tricked with a faker by that shady mediator.

“Yeah, I got it.” Zhao cut off Suzuki. “You want me to prove my abilities to you, right?”

He cuts straight to the point. Suzuki nodded. “Yes.”

“So? What do I have to do to pass?”

He explained the details in full. “Some of our executives got killed off these past few days in quick succession. When we looked into it, we figured out it was a killer working for an organization called Shouwan.”

“Ahh, Shouwan. They’ve been getting ahead of themselves recently.” Zhao spoke as though he knew them. “I’ll give them a friendly reminder. I’ll sneak

into their hideout and bring back their heads.”

“Don’t do that.”

That could provoke them and cause them to go into a frenzy. And we’d be the ones to receive the backlash from it.

When Suzuki explained that, Zhao relented. “In other words, we have to restrain them.”

“Well, yes, if that’s-”

Zhao boasted. “Then I’ll make a situation where Shouwan can’t lay a hand on you guys.”

“How?”

“I have an idea.” Zhao readjusted himself in his seat and leaned forward. “Their main source of income is drugs. They should have a place to hide them somewhere.”

“If that’s the case, then we already have looked into it. They have them stored in a warehouse.”

“Where’s it at?”

“Near Hakata Pier.”

Alright then, Zhao said as he stood up. “Prepare a car. One where we can put many people into. And of course, we’ll need a driver.”

“I’ll drive.” Suzuki also stood up.

“Uh-huh.” Zhao grinned. “You will?”

“I’m good at driving.”

That was just a coverup. There was a necessity to watch this man and see just what he was planning and what he would do. So Suzuki volunteered to be the driver.

As instructed, he got a black van which could have eight passengers. Zhao only brought with him a Chinese sword and got into the passenger’s seat. For charging into enemy territory, he was equipped lightly.

After driving for twenty minutes, the sea came into view. There were small and large ships floating on the water. Warehouses stood along the coastlands. One of these buildings belonged to Shouwan. They parked in the shadow of a nearby building and watched the area for a few minutes from the car.

“.....There’s a truck.”

One truck parked in front of Shouwan’s warehouse.

“They must be transporting drugs.”

Men came out of the warehouse and were conversing amongst themselves about something. Zhao watched them wordlessly. After a while the shutter began to open. The truck moved inside, and the men began to move the cardboard boxes inside. There were five people including the driver of the truck.

“Five, huh. Guess that will do.”

Zhao finally spoke up.

“You stay here and keep watch.”

He told him and got out of the car. He approached the warehouse with his Chinese sword in one hand. *No way, Suzuki realized. He plans to trespass the enemy’s turf alone? And just with a sword for a weapon?* Suzuki was amazed.

From there it was only a few moments. By the time the men realized Zhao’s presence he had already slipped under the shutter and got inside the warehouse. Zhao sauntered up behind one of the men and slit his throat.

Confusion ran through the other men at the sudden death of their friend in front of them. One of them went to attack Zhao unarmed and one made a run for it. And one of them tried to make a call somewhere, trying to request for reinforcements.

Zhao first attacked the man coming at him. He dodged the attack as the man leapt towards him and stabbed him in the heart from behind. He then turned to the man trying to run away and threw his Chinese sword at him. The blade struck the man head on right through the back of his thigh. Zhao walked up to the man and pulled out his weapon from his leg. The man gave a yell as Zhao

adjusted his grip on the blade before piercing the man's heart with it.

Two men were left. Both were unarmed and unable to move. Zhao went up to them and punched them in the face and gut, making them unconscious. He then waved a hand towards Suzuki, signaling him to drive over. Suzuki did as prompted and parked the car in front of the warehouse before getting out.

".....Is it really alright to do this?"

Glancing into the warehouse splattered with blood, Suzuki frowned. The other went nuts in there. He started to become anxious, hoping that the enemy would not try to attack them back.

Zhao on the other hand was calm.

"Put these two in the car." He pointed to the men with his chin. He only let two live. One of them held a cell phone in his right hand.

"It looks like he called for help."

"Well, that couldn't have been helped." Zhao laughed.

Suzuki lifted up the men and put them into the vehicle.

"Reinforcements may arrive. We should hurry up and get out of here."

He called out to Zhao, but there was no response. Zhao was crouching down to one of the bodies.

"What are you doing?"

"Since I went through all this trouble, I thought I could get some spoils from them."

When Suzuki looked closer he saw the man was fishing through the pockets of the dead person's. Zhao took out the man's wallet and put it into his own without hesitation. Suzuki was shocked.

"Hurry up and get in the car." Suzuki wanted to leave the scene as soon as possible. It would be a problem if someone from the Shouwan or just a bystander spotted them. "We're getting out of here."

However, Zhao did not do as he instructed. He paid no mind to Suzuki and walked over to each corpse cheerfully and pilfered through their belongings. He

was a man with bad habits. Suzuki sighed. This looked like it was going to take a while, so he went ahead and got into the driver's seat first.

After that Saruwatari was unable to track the Kakyuu Group's executives whereabouts. The job to assassinate that was setback, leaving Saruwatari with time he did not know how to use. While he was waiting around in a hotel in Fukuoka until he received the next instruction from his client, Nitta called him. It was an emergency call for help. Apparently someone had attacked Shouwan's warehouse. 'Go and help them right away. I'll head over there shortly too.' He was told before being given the address of the warehouse.

It was perfect timing; Saruwatari was just about bored. "Leave it to me." He replied happily and left the room. He got into a taxi and urged the driver to hurry. Their destination was the Hakata pier. It was about a five minute drive from where he was.

However, when Saruwatari arrived to the scene it was already too late. The shutters to the warehouse were open. There were a few bodies likely to be Shouwan members fallen inside. A man stood next to one of the bodies. Noticing Saruwatari's presence, the man turned around. He was young – probably younger than him. He had a sword in his right hand. Red blood coated the widely curved blade. This man must be the one who attacked the warehouse.

"Ahh~," The man looked over Saruwatari and shrugged his shoulders. "An interference arrived."

Saruwatari, vigilant, reached for his ninja sword hidden in his upper jacket.

".....You're the one who killed these guys?"

He gripped the guard and glared at the man. The other smirked provocatively. "I am. What will you do if I say that?"

"Kill you."

Saruwatari unsheathed his sword. The moment the man reached for his pocket Saruwatari struck his blade down towards his chest. There was the glint of light. The ninja sword and the man's weapon clashed, countering the attack. Saruwatari tried to take a step forward when it happened.

Saruwatari saw something shimmer far behind the man on the water. *Someone's there.* It was the glint given off of a lens. *Could it be the scope of a rifle?*

In that moment when he lost his focus, his opponent closed in on him. As Saruwatari tried to quickly step back he slipped, and he fell over unintentionally. Dammit. The ground was wet. He must have stepped in the blood. He then fell forward.

“What the heck? Are you an amateur?”

The moment Saruwatari used his sheathe to hold up his body, he heard that voice next to his ear. Then there was an attack directly from his side – a swiveled kick. Saruwatari was blown back outside the warehouse and fell onto the concrete. He remained on the top of the pier and stood back up.

He suddenly felt another presence. There was someone else here. Saruwatari saw the silhouette of another man besides the red-haired one in his peripheral vision.

He had friends? Saruwatari tutted. *Then the glint earlier was from him?*

He saw the man holding a gun. He had it pointing towards Saruwatari from a van. He pulled the trigger, and there was the sound of a gunshot. Saruwatari immediately jumped back and dodged the bullet. He then plunged into the sea back first. There was the sound of splashing.

In an instant, Saruwatari was wrapped up by the ocean waters. The lukewarm sensation and the scent of the sea assaulted his senses, and the water coiled around him. It was hard for him to breathe.

Shit. I can't swim.

He flapped both of his hands around him and somehow managed to get his head above the water's surface. In the distance he saw the van drive away. *Dammit, they got away.*

His clothes got soaked, adding more weight onto him. It was heavy. He felt like he was sinking. And with the additional weight of his weapon, it was hard to move. Once again he submerged under the pull of the water.

It was then.

An arm reached into the sea. Someone's hand managed to grab Saruwatari's arm as he drowned. Saruwatari was pulled up with a lot of strength.

"Bu-ha.....!"

When he emerged from the water, a small white boat was in front of him. A man was holding onto Saruwatari on it. He held out his other hand towards Saruwatari. He grabbed that hand and scrambled onto the boat. It was a simple fishing boat no more than two meters in length. The boat greatly shook from Saruwatari's weight collapsing onto it.

"Gah, ha, gah." Saruwatari coughed out the water from his lungs while taking in deep breaths. The ocean water got into his nose and blurred his vision. "Gah, kah, haa, haa."

He was saved. *Did one of the fishermen passing by save me?* Just as he thought that, however –

"Whoa, I caught a big one."

He heard a familiar Hakata dialect from above him. Saruwatari quickly whipped his head up towards the man.

"Why the hell are you here?!"

The one who saved Saruwatari was Banba.

"That's what I should be sayin'." Banba slumped his shoulders. "Whatcha doin' 'round here?"

A pair of binoculars were laid down in the boat. Saruwatari made an assessment. *I see, so that glinting earlier were from these lenses. This man watched us?*

".....Shut it. As if I'd tell you."

Banba drew close to Saruwatari's face. "Come now, don'tcha say that. How 'bout we exchange information?"

"Haa? As if I would help you."

"Hmm.....it's fine, ain't it? You don't got to be all worked up over it."

Banba grinned. But in the next moment –

“Wha-”

Saruwatari was roughly pushed, and he lost his balance. Stumbling, he was swallowed by the ocean once again. There was the splash from colliding with the water.

Saruwatari had fallen into the ocean again and clung onto the side of the boat. Banba looked down from above the boat. “I’ll help you if you speak honestly with me.”

Damn this bastard to hell.

“.....Don’t get ahead of yourself.”

Saruwatari reached over and grabbed Banba’s clothing. He then pulled with as much strength as he could muster.

“Oo-wah.”

This time Banba was the one who lost his balance and fell from the boat. There was another large splash immediately following it.

Banba learned from the information Enokida provided him that Suzuki had headed over to Shouwan’s warehouse. He arrived before he did, so he got onto a small boat floating nearby and waited for him to appear. And then something unexpected happened. The man Suzuki brought with him began slaughtering the members of Shouwan. And then Saruwatari appeared a few minutes later. Banba watched them while remaining hidden as they fought. Suzuki and the other man managed to flee in the end. He saved Saruwatari who had fallen into the ocean and was drowning, but he was nonetheless surprised at the turn of events.

“.....I got wet because of you.”

Banba scowled at him while wringing his shirt.

“That’s my line.” Saruwatari glared back at him.

The two fell into the sea together and fought for a bit in it. They gave in after some time and reluctantly shared information since they could not stay in the water.

“So, what was you here for?”

“I was called to come here. They said they needed help because they were being attacked.”

“And who called you?”

“A client.” Saruwatari answered plainly. “I won’t say more than that.”

“Was it the Shouwan?”

“.....”

Banba apparently hit the mark.

“You’re hired by the Shouwan? Ahh, so that’s why you killed Kim.”

“.....You knew about that.”

Saruwatari relented and acknowledged it. He must have thought it was pointless to hide it.

“More importantly, who were those two?”

Saruwatari asked him. Banba was the one to answer this time.

“One was a man from the Kakyuu Group named Suzuki. He’s the guy who shot you. I don’t know the other fella though.”

“Probably a killer hired by the Kakyuu Group.”

That’s the vibe I got off from him, Saruwatari stated. It was nothing more than a deduction made by his instincts, but that was also an appropriate train of thought.

“.....I’m gonna kill that redhead.” Saruwatari made a grave expression recalling what had just transpired and clenched his fists tightly.

Suzuki glared to the man in the passenger’s seat beside him while gripping the wheel with his sweaty hands. “Because you were messing around, you unnecessarily encountered someone.”

Suzuki did not expect for the enemy to rush over that quickly. Let alone that killer – the Submarine Ninja.

“That guy from earlier,” Zhao spoke with his chin resting on his hand against

the window; smiling. “He was a killer Shouwan hired? He was a mere simpleton.”

Suzuki recognized the man as soon as he appeared to the warehouse. *It was him*. When he realized it he got out of the driver’s seat and took out his gun. He had the perfect opportunity to get back at him for earlier. He hid beside the vehicle and pointed the gun towards the man. The other was facing him. Noticing his presence, he drew back. *Like hell I’ll let you escape*, Suzuki pulled the trigger. The man bounced back and fell into the ocean. Suzuki thought the bullet had hit him. He must have gotten him.

He wanted to check whether he was alive or not, but he felt the presence of another enemy. Staying around too long would have been too dangerous. Zhao got into the car, and Suzuki sped off. They left the warehouse behind them and continued to drive, bringing them to the present situation.

“So what are you going to do with them?” Suzuki pointed to the men in the back seats with his thumb. The two men they kidnapped were still in the back.

“Do you have a jail?” Zhao gave a strange request. “One with cell bars would be great.”

After Suzuki thought over it for a few moments, he suggested. “If you want a cage, we have a small room in our main branch office.”

“A cage?”

“Our previous president made it to keep a tiger in.” The tiger had died some time ago though.

“Head over there.” Zhao told him.

They arrived at the main office and carried the men out of the car. The two men were still unconscious. They put them inside the cage and locked them up.

Zhao looked into the cage from the outside and gave his approval. “It’s a little too big.....But I guess it’ll work.”

The Banba Detective Office formerly did have a bathroom and a sink, but it did not have a bathtub. When Lin began freeloading from there he persistently complained, ‘there’s no way I’m staying here without a bath!’ He went ahead

and called a specialist to begin reformation construction last year in early winter. He had a room with a bathtub and shower installed in it and a changing room in the corner of the office. Banba was startled that he did that on his own volition. However, 'I got permission from the landlord and I'm paying for it, so no complaints.' Unable to say any rhetoric back at the proud Lin, Banba had only given him a sullen look.

The office that was Banba's workplace and living residence had been fairly changed as well. Lin had remodeled it to as he liked it, bought and replaced the furniture and brought in more of his personal belongings. His roommate liked it clean, so the trash was always kept under control. Banba's lifestyle had changed too. Since they had gotten a bathtub, Banba had been visiting the bathhouse less often as of late.

After he left Saruwatari, Banba went to the large public bathhouse. He wanted to wash off the salt water from his body as quick as possible. He ended up taking a long, leisurely bath there and got dizzy for staying so long.

By the time Banba returned to the office, it was already late at night. He got dirty thanks to Saruwatari, but he felt great that he was able to take his time and enjoy the public bath once in a while. He opened the door, feeling pleased.

"I'm home."

There was no reply. That was always the case, and yet it was unusually quiet inside. Banba did not even hear the TV playing.

"Lin-chan?"

He called out for him once more.

"What's this now?"

He could not find his roommate in the bathroom or the water closet.

".....Lin-chan ain't here."

He spoke to himself and tilted his head. *Did he go out somewhere? He should be watching TV at this hour though.*

He spotted a note on the desk. It was the back of the paper Banba left him earlier that morning.

‘Thanks for everything.’ That was written with his scrawled, messy handwriting.

Zhao gripped his Chinese sword and banged it against the steel bars roughly. With the sharp metallic sound the men in the cage regained consciousness. However, they still were unable to catch up with the situation. They looked around the area with blank expressions.

“You guys awake?”

Zhao called out to them from outside the cage.

“This is the main office of the Kakyuu Group, meaning you two are held captive by your enemy.”

The men’s faces hardened at the mention of the Kakyuu Group.

“There’s one way for you to get out alive. Fight each other to the death.”

What did he say? Suzuki’s eyes widened in shock. The men who were ordered to do so were also taken by surprise.

“Use these and kill the other.” Zhao tossed in two survival knives from between the bars. “The one who wins will be allowed to leave.”

The knives dropped next to the men’s sides. However, neither one of them made any motion to grab them.

“D-don’t screw with us!”

“As if we could do that!”

The men’s yells resounded loudly in the spacious room.

“Ha, you two are such damn hypocrites.” Zhao cackled. “If you don’t hurry up and kill the other, then both of you will die.”

What on earth is this man thinking?

Suzuki watched Zhao closely from the side. He was taken aback upon seeing his expression. His eyes were wide open, and his lips were curved up into a large smile. He looked like a demon. He was enjoying this – this situation.

It was just as Yang had said. This man was insane.

“Uwaaaa!”

One of the men suddenly screamed and picked up the knife. He pointed it not to his comrade but towards Zhao. He reached through the bars and attempted to make a slash at Zhao’s face.

“You! You bastard! Die!”

However, the blade did not reach him. It merely swung in front of Zhao.

Zhao watched silently at the display. The smile vanished from his face. He stared down at the futile resistance with cold eyes.

After a few moments, he muttered, displeased. “.....You’re no fun.”

He then swung down his sword and severed the man’s arm mercilessly.

“Gu-waah.” The man held his arm and dropped to his knees.

Zhao pushed his sword through the openings in the cage. He stuck it through the man’s throat as he sat in agony and then twisted his wrist; the man’s severed head dropped to the ground unceremoniously.

“Congratulations. You are the winner.Although it was an unfair victory.” After he swiped off the blood from his sword, Zhao locked gazes with the other man and stated. “The winner gets to have a prize. So how about you take it with you and boast to your comrades about it?”

Nitta, upon seeing Saruwatari thoroughly sodden and dripping wet, widened his eyes in surprise. He asked what had happened, but Saruwatari did not answer honestly. “A person was drowning, so I saved them.”

“Whaa!”

Nitta raised his voice in shock.

“Sarucchi, you learned how to swim? When? You sunk like a rock in high school though.”

“.....Shut it.”

“Ah, now that I think about, when we were timed in swimming class, you were the only one who had to use a kickboard.” Nitta blurted out that past memory.

He pisses me off. This shitty glasses freak. "I told you to shut the hell up!"

Saruwatari gave him a punch right into his gut. Nitta gave a small groan and crouched over.

At that point, Lau had arrived to the scene. There were the fallen bodies of his comrades scattered about, their merchandise devastated, and blood on the walls and ground. Looking at the disastrous scene, Lau did not conceal his resentment.

".....My god." He then blamed Saruwatari who had arrived not a few minutes earlier to the scene. "This all happened while you were present?"

"As if." Saruwatari frowned at the accusation. He objected back as he wrung his tank top. "By the time I arrived everyone was already dead. They were slow to call for backup."

"That's right." Nitta agreed with him. "He took the call and headed over right away, but we were a step too slow."

Lau made a small click of his tongue.

"One, two, three -" He then counted the bodies in the area and tilted his head. ".....That's strange. We're missing two people."

Two among the five including the guard and the driver were not present. *Did they vanish somewhere? Did they manage to get away or were they captured by the enemy?*

The place had fallen silent. And then –

"L-Lau-san....."

They heard a small voice calling out to Lau. A man stood holding a box at the entrance of the warehouse. He seemed to be one of Lau's subordinates who had disappeared, but something was off.

"Where did you go?"

".....I was captured by the guys from the Kakyuu Group." The man was completely spent.

This was what went down according to his story. They were on watch as usual

when the transporter truck came. They opened the shutters and let the vehicle inside. Just as they started to pack the truck one of their comrades was killed out of nowhere in front of them. Before they realized it there was an unknown man standing before them. He was a young red-haired man who wielded a sword.

“A young red-haired man?” Saruwatari frowned. *That’s the same guy I saw.*

That man then killed their other friends and knocked out the other two. They were then captured and brought to the Kakyuu Group’s main office.

“The man ordered us to kill each other. But he was against it and.....”

The subordinate cut off. He looked down and pointed to the box he was holding. It was a one meter squared cardboard box. He must have received it from the enemy. Initially it looked like any other cardboard box, but it was spoiled red in some spots. Red liquid was dripping from the bottom. They had a bad premonition about this.

The box was neatly sealed with duct tape. Lau’s face stiffened when he opened the box and looked inside it.

“This is-” He was at a loss for words.

Inside was a human head – specifically their comrade’s head. It was the head of the other man who was taken.

“.....That bastard. He’s making fools of us.”

Saruwatari tutted. *How annoying.* He felt like the man was making a fool of them. The word ‘amateur’ said by that sneering man resounded in his head still.

“Leave it to me. I’ll head into their hideout and kill all of-”

“Wait!”

Lau raised his voice and stopped Saruwatari. He looked inside the box again. Something glinted inside the severed head’s mouth – something was held in there. When he examined it closer, he saw a ring with a large jewel on it placed between its lips. Lau’s complexion changed upon seeing that ring as though he recognized it.

“Don’t raise a hand against the Kakyuu Group for a while.”

“Haa?” Saruwatari scowled at Lau’s words. “What are you saying?”

This was a declaration of war. They had been provoked. If they did not do anything soon, then his men would be crushed. And yet Lau completely lost the will to fight.

“Do not go up against them.” He repeated without any strength backing it. “This is an order. Obey it.”

What the hell? You’re kidding. Just when I thought I could enjoy a good fight. After waiting for so long, I’m told to just ‘don’t go up against them?’

The face of the redheaded man flickered in his head. *Is he saying I have to let him go? I have to? You’re kidding me.*

Suppressing his pent-up anger, Saruwatari kicked a nearby wall.

The Shouwan requested armistice roughly two hours after they sent them their comrade’s head. The group turned their attention away from them and took a sudden peaceful attitude towards them. They even proposed a time and date to meet, expressing interest in settling matters in a discussion.

“See?” Hearing that, Zhao gave him a triumphant look as he lounged in the main office’s parlor room. “It went swimmingly, wouldn’t you say?”

Zhao had boasted that he would restrain their enemy for them, but everything had gone exactly according to his plan. Suzuki found that unusual.

“What sort of trick is this?” Suzuki questioned back as he sat down facing him.

“It’s really nothing special. I killed a Shouwan executive not too long ago. It was a job I took from the largest underground organization in China. That ring was something I took from them, and it’s an item that serves as proof of their executive status.”

Now that he mentioned it, Suzuki recalled that Zhao had put an expensive-looking ring into the severed head’s mouth.

“Well, in any case, I’m a bit famous among them now. And now I’m with the Kakyuu Group. What do you think about that?”

After Suzuki thought it over for a moment, he said. “.....They would think we have an alliance with that big organization?”

“Exactly.” Zhao nodded and continued. “They are beginning to fear the possibility of someone backing you. They can’t reckless make a move against you guys. So now you should be able to relax for a while.”

I see, Suzuki hummed in understanding. So without realizing it, they managed to catch a fairly large fish. They could use this man to their advantage. He was more than he anticipated.

“Now then.” Zhao changed the topic. “Will you get to doing my favor already?”

“Of course we have.”

Suzuki nodded deeply.

“I had my subordinate look into the killer Xianming Lin you were searching for.” He took out a stack of papers from his bag and handed it over to Zhao. “We found his data.”

“This is it? There’s not much.” He made a displeased expression. He looks at the photo pasted on the sheet and nodded. “Yeah, that’s him. No doubt about it.”

“Xianming Lin was personally hired by an executive named Zhang.”

“And where’s that Zhang now?”

“He’s dead.”

Zhao’s eyes widened. “.....What did you say?”

“He was killed. Zhang’s head was cut off, and he died in the torture room. Xianming Lin was involved in that case. He seemed to have been unsatisfied with his treatment. His lackeys have seen him dispute with Zhang over payment many times.”

Zhao gave a laugh. “I see. So he couldn’t be fully manageable?”

“There were no surveillance cameras in the torture room, and the footage we did have were terrible quality. And so what went down has remained a mystery, but it seems Lin had hired another hitman to kill Zhang. After that, Lin had disappeared. We don’t know his current whereabouts.”

“.....Disappeared?” Zhao frowned deeply. “When was this?”

“Last year in November.”

Right now it was the end of July. So this had happened more than half a year ago.

“Then he may no longer be in Fukuoka.Ahh, dammit. This was a waste of time and effort then.” Zhao grimaced in regret and ruffled his hair.

Suddenly they heard an electric ring. Zhao’s cell phone was ringing. It was an incoming call. Zhao pressed the accept call button and pressed his phone to his ear. “What’s up, Yang?”

Yang – the face of that suspicious mediator came to Suzuki’s mind.

“What? You found him? Where?” The tone in Zhao’s voice turned cheerful. It must have been good news. “Hakata Station? Okay, got it.”

Suzuki asked Zhao as he dropped the call, “what was it?”

“A Vietnamese hitman scout Yang knows apparently saw a man who looks similar to Xianming Lin a week before last.” So he was around during the events of the week before last. “The possibility that Xianming Lin is still in Fukuoka is high then.”

“Then what will you do? Will you drop by the informants in Fukuoka City and have them search for him?”

“No,” Zhao shook his head. “I already tried that, but it didn’t work out. So I’ll set it up so he’ll have to come and look for me this time.”

“How?”

“I’ll leave a message. Addressed to Xianming Lin.”

Suzuki did not follow what he was saying. However, Zhao seemed to have an idea.

“.....Hey, Suzuki.” Zhao grinned. He seemed to be in a good mood. “I have a little favor.”

“What is it?”

Zhao proclaimed without any hesitation. “I want personal information on

individuals. As much as you can find.”

Lin wandered around the city aimlessly after leaving Banba’s place. He left Hakata and headed towards Tenjin on a bus. He thought to kill time by going shopping, but his belongings were heavy and it would be more trouble on him, so he decided against it.

He got off the bus in the middle of its route and unwilling decided to stay at an internet cafe in Nakasu’s Gates Building.

“Ah.”

Just as he got off the elevator, a familiar mushroom head greeted him.

“Geh.” He unconsciously raised his voice.

He ended up crossing paths with Enokida again. He did not want to see any of his acquaintances at the moment.

“What are you doing here?”

Enokida asked him, but Lin was unsure how to respond. “N-nothing much. There’s just a manga I wanted to read.....”

“Uh-huh.” Enokida merely muttered. He said it in a tone where Lin could not tell if he believed him or saw through his lie.

“Well, in any case, perfect timing. I have a favor to ask of you.”

“A favor?”

He was the one to ask the informant Enokida for favors. It was rare for him to ask Lin favors.

“You’re free right now, right?” Enokida grinned. “Take up this job.”

Enokida grabbed Lin’s arm without waiting for a reply and dragged him into the elevator. There was a bookstore on the first floor of the Gates Building with a cafe in its corner, and Enokida brought him there. After ordering two iced coffees, they head to a table in the center of the room.

“The truth is.” Enokida entered the main topic while pouring syrup into his glass. “Two informants were killed in succession just recently.”

Lin’s eyes widened, and he removed his lips from the straw.

“That’s, um.....sounds pretty terrible.”

“It is, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“The next one could be me.”

Enokida smiled as he said that. He had the attitude of putting the words ‘what should I do?’ or ‘how thrilling’ after saying ‘could be me.’

“Well, I don’t plan on easily being killed though.”

Lin felt he knew what Enokida would ask for a ‘favor.’ “So you want me to be your bodyguard? So you don’t have to worry about when you’ll be attacked?”

“No.” However, he shook his hand in denial. “Not that. I want you to kill the culprit.”

Lin frowned at the unexpected reply.

“It was the same guy who killed the two. He’s around twenty years old. He’s about 170 centimeters tall, I’d say.”

“You already know that much about him.”

As expected of an informant. Lin admired his skill. The police probably had not even found the culprit yet.

“Others in the same trade can be work partners and rivals to an informant. So we watch each other’s backs and engage in a battle of intelligence. For instance -” Enokida pointed to Lin. “Look under the chair you’re sitting at.”

“Under my chair.....?”

As instructed, Lin leaned over and looked underneath his seat. There was something there. A small black object was attached to the leg of the chair. Lin reached over to grab it.

“Is this.....a bug?”

“Indeed.” Enokida nodded. He took the listening device and dropped it into the coffee he was drinking. “This is another informant’s work. Someone knew I visited this cafe sometimes and planted this here.”

“.....What a crazy world for you informants.”

“And naturally I do the same thing back. I listen in on the conversations other informants have to fish for information. I set up hidden cameras in the homes of those two informants who were killed as well. They must have noticed the bugs though, as those were disposed of. So it was fortunate the cameras I set up caught the culprit killing them.”

“So that’s it.” Lin understood it now. That was how Enokida knew the details of the culprit’s characteristics then.

“The culprit is this man.”

Enokida took out his tablet from his bag and placed it on the table. The image was displayed on the screen, and he showed it to Lin. There was a young man leaving an apartment shown in clear quality on it.

“He’s-” Lin’s eyes widened in shock. He recognized that man.

“There’s no way.....Why is this man.....” He should not be in this world in the first place anymore. He should be dead.

Lin was taken aback and in panic as though he had seen a ghost.

“Do you know him?” Enokida tilted his head in question.

“.....Yeah.”

Lin nodded with wide eyes.

“We were raised in the same facility. This is the proof of it.” Lin pointed to the man’s arm. Enokida enlarged that area. On the man’s upper arm was a barcode-like shape.

“Is it a tattoo?” Enokida adjusted the device and read aloud the barcode. “..... I see numbers. It’s seven digits. What is this number?”

“It’s a management number. I have the same one.” Lin rolled up the sleeve of his T-shirt and showed him the same marking on his arm. He then looked down at the screen again.

“His name is Feilang.He was my friend.”

Lin closed his eyes, his sealed memories of the past surging up within him.

“I killed him six years ago.”

Translation Notes:

For those wondering what a water closet is, it's a space/room for just a toilet. It's not common to use this term in America, and we usually have the toilet and shower area in the same room.

In Japan, however, it is rare for the toilet and the shower area to be in the same room and there's always a shower head to clean yourself off with separate from the bathtub, which is purely for you to soak and relax in. You don't ever clean yourself in the bathtub, as you share the same water with the rest of the household to conserve energy.

The text actually brings up some of these layout differences, but you can read more [here](#) if you want to learn the cultural differences better.

Sixth Inning

Top of Sixth Inning

‘Goodbye, Mao.’

Feilang sneered in front of him. He threw down his sword. Lin immediately turned over, rolling away to dodge the attack. Although he missed any vital areas, the cut made in his back was deep. It was hard to move. He could not dodge the next attack.

He was kicked in his wound, and a sharp pain ran through his whole body. Lin dropped to the floor once again. Feilang pushed him down from above him. He climbed on top of Lin and punched him in the face. A gash was made inside his mouth, and he tasted the metallic taste of blood.

He could not move. No matter how hard he tried, he could not escape from Feilang’s grasp.

‘Die.’

Feilang attempted to swing his sword down again. He was lightly smiling and his eyes were filled to the brim with killing intent.

I don’t want to die. He clung onto that thought and spotted a weapon in his wandering vision. A knife was lying down next to his right side. Lin reached out for it and grazed it.

He was desperate. He managed to get it in his grasp and thrust it at Feilang’s face. The tip of the knife embedded into Feilang’s left eye.

‘U-uwah!’ Feilang gave a strangled cry and leapt off of him. ‘Argh.’

He held both hands to his face and writhed. Blood gushed out from his crushed eyeball, covering half of his face in blood.

‘Damn yooooou!’

Feilang shrieked and swung his sword carelessly. With part of his sight taken from him, he missed his target and attempted to strike again.

Now’s my chance!

Lin gritted his teeth and stood up. He readjusted the blade in his hand and charged at Feilang and struck his heart.

‘Gargh, ha-’

Feilang coughed up blood. He slumped forward onto Lin before slipping off of him and dropping to the ground. His limbs were convulsing.

After a while Feilang stopped moving.

‘Ha, ah, haa.’ Lin could only hear his own breathing in the now silent cell. The blood spread out around them. Lin’s pulse was fast, and he could not calm down. His shoulders hefted up and down repeatedly, his breathing ragged.

The next moment the door opened automatically. It meant he must step outside. Lin took a step into the hallway, half dragging himself to do so. Boys came out one by one from their cells at a time. He heard shouting, and then one person died. The doors would open and another one would come out. Another shout and another died. And it repeated like that.

The boys, covered in blood, stood absentmindedly in the hallway.

‘Congratulations.’ The voice of the instructor poured over them. ‘You guys have passed the exam superbly.’

What ‘congratulations?’ Lin bit into his lip hard.

‘Now that you have killed your partner, you all have cast aside your humanity. From this day forth, you have become human weapons.’

The instructor’s words heavily weighed onto their hearts.

This is the first time I killed someone.

They were taught how to kill someone this whole time. They underwent five years of training for it. They had those lessons pounded into their head numerous times over. And yet they could not stop shaking.

Lin looked over the cell with red eyes. His partner’s corpse was in there. He did not think of anything the moment he did it. He was just desperate to save his own life. By the time he realized it, he was dead.

A lukewarm sensation enveloped both of his hands. They were stained with

Feilang's blood.

It finally sank in. *I killed a person with these hands.*

Feilang betrayed me. I killed him because I had to. That was what he told himself. And yet he could not shake off the feeling. It was not right to kill him. Regardless of the reason, there was no life that was alright to take.

'Ah-aah, aaaah!'

Lin collapsed where he stood and sobbed. He held his head in his hands and dug his nails into it. His brown hair dyed red with blood.

Something had changed within him. He felt like he had died. He felt a sense of bewilderment and fear as though he had changed into a different living being. Agony, grief, dismay, nihility, guilt – various emotions rushed through him like a flood gate had opened. It was hard to breathe. He felt like his heart would burst.

The other boys wept like Lin did. They grieved. They lamented. They mourned the death of their friend.

The instructor had told them to never cry. That tears weaken the heart. That man's words he beat into them passed through Lin's head even at this moment. But they did not stop his tears. *I know, shitbag.* Lin cried in large voice.

His friend, partner, and companion. And unfortunately he would only be the first one. From this point on he would have to kill dozens to hundreds of people in order to survive.

He finally realized. Just what sort of gruesome world he had stepped into. He wanted to get away from it as soon as he could.

But he could not retreat. Even if he wanted to go back he could not. *I've become a murderer. This will be my job from now on. I can only live by killing people. All alone. Without trusting in anyone and only depending on myself with my own strength. I'll kill and kill and kill more people. All while being tormented and crying like this each time I take someone's life.*

It's not possible. It's unbearable.

Just like that man said, I can only cast aside my heart, right?

Bottom of Sixth Inning

Lin quietly and slowly exhaled. After he finished telling his story from beginning to end, Lin placed his coffee to his lips. The ice inside it had thoroughly melted, lessening the flavor.

“I see.” Enokida muttered in a near groan, following Lin’s upbringing. “So after overcoming the harsh training in that boys weapon development facility you killed your best friend you shared a room with.”

“Yeah.”

That was the final procedure in the factory. The instructor instilled the boy weapons with the essential heartlessness in the final stage. So that they would not hesitate the next time when they killed someone. And in reality, it was effective. After he had left the factory, Lin never once hesitated when killing someone. Until this day.

“Yet the friend who should have been killed by your hand is still alive right now, right?”

“Yeah.”

Lin nodded and reflected.

“.....He must have been close to death. I was soft then.”

He may have let up too much. His desire to not kill him may have unconsciously allowed that to happen. Lin formed his words as he thought back to that moment. “I wasn’t calm at that time. I was in a state of shock and didn’t get to have a good look of my surroundings. I did aim for his vital point, and he looked like he died.....But apparently that wasn’t the case.”

So Feilang was alive. Just how did he manage to survive after that final exam?

“And how are you now?”

Enokida suddenly asked him.

Lin asked back, unable to read into the meaning of his question. “.....Of what?”

“How do you feel about Feilang being alive?”

“How.....” He was at a loss of words, bewildered. He himself was unsure. He did not expect Feilang to be alive. The man who was his best friend – the man who should have been killed by his hand was still in this world; he never considered the possibility.

“Well, I’m shocked. I feel like the impossible just happened.”

“That’s not what I mean.” Enokida sighed. “Aren’t you relieved to hear that? You don’t think, ‘I’m glad he’s not dead’ or anything?”

“Nothing like that.” After Lin replied back in annoyance he added in his mind, *probably*.

“So the next time you meeUnet will you be able to kill him for certain?”

“I-”

He lost his words.

Could I kill Feilang once more? Lin asked himself that. *Could I kill my best friend without any hesitation this time?*

“.....I don’t know.” After questioning himself on it, what came out was an unreliable answer. There was a part of him which loathed the Feilang who betrayed him. And yet there was another part of him that despite that wished for Feilang to smile at him like back then.

‘How about we work together?’ Does he still believe in that rash remark? Lin was exasperated. *This is ridiculous.*

Enokida saw Lin fall silent and shrugged his shoulders. “Looks like I should ask someone else to do this job.”

“Wait.”

Lin raised his voice. If possible, he did not want to kill him. He did not want to do the same act twice. And yet, he did want anyone else to kill him either.

In any case, he needed time to sort his feelings about this. “.....Give me a bit of time to think about it.”

He did not like this about himself. *When did I become so soft?*

Unexpectedly Enokida’s smartphone vibrated. He must have gotten an

incoming call.

“Hello?” He hit the button to accept the call and pressed it to his ear. “Ahh, Banba-san.”

At the mention of his name, Lin grimaced. “Geh.”

“Eh? What? Lin disappeared?” Enokida glanced over to him. “Lin-kun is-”

“Shh!” Lin quickly pressed his index finger to his lips.

“I haven’t seen him. Yeah, I don’t know.Got it. I’ll give you a call if I do see him.”

Enokida dropped the call and smirked.

“I didn’t know you would run away from home. Did you two have a fight or something?”

“No.” Lin replied straightforwardly.

“But I’m curious now. What happened? Spill the beans already.”

“Shut up.”

“If you don’t tell me, I’ll call up your guardian.” Lin was taken aback as Enokida flashed his phone at him. *Stop. Please, anything but that.* He was forced to agree.

“Why did you suddenly leave home? Are you rebelling at your age?”

“.....What do you think I’ve been through up until this point?”

Lin gave up reluctantly.

“For instance, a guy like you has a clear objective, right? You’ll do anything for money for good or bad reasons, so you’re easy to figure out.”

“Come on now, giving me such compliment will make me blush.”

“.....But, he’s different. I have no idea what he is thinking. It’s unsettling. He’s not someone I should easily put my trust in. And yet I’ve been too unguarded around him up until this point.”

“Ahh, I see.” Enokida exclaimed cheerfully. “In other words, you don’t want to get betrayed by Banba-san, so you planned on getting away before that

happened.”

“That’s not exactly the problem.” Lin frowned and explained. “I’m just concerned for my own wellbeing. It’s dangerous for a killer to live with someone they know nothing about, right? It doesn’t matter whether he betrays me or not.”

“Yeah, sure it is.” Enokida gave him the simple yes-man response while holding his straw in his mouth.

“Hey, come on now.....” *What is with that attitude? Even though he’s the one who asked me.* Lin gave a small sigh.

“Anyway, I have no choice but to go through with this. Because I’ve been living this pampered lifestyle for half a year, my senses have considerably dulled.”

Lin considered it an ill tendency to have. At this rate he felt he would become useless as a killer. His very existence would be destroyed. So he separated himself from that man.

“That’s not so bad.” However, Enokida proclaimed optimistically. “The pampered life.”

“And in what way?” Lin did not understand at all.

“You’re far too hard on yourself. It’s not like us people from the underground will have a nice death or anything.”

That was true. That was their fate.

“We may be sliced and diced up into pieces. We may be tortured and die a painful death. Then shouldn’t we enjoy the pampered life? Eat some delicious food and do what we like.” His sharp gaze peering at him through his long bangs shot straight at Lin. “Or do you want to return to your previous self?”

Unsure of how to respond, Lin averted his gaze.

“And I think you can unexpectedly believe in anything else besides money. Although this is coming from me.”

Lin could not agree to that. “Human beings are creatures who act for money.”

“Huh, you think so?”

Enokida gave him a toothy smile.

“Then why did you kill people for five hundred yen just previously?”

Lin was startled at those words.

Anything else besides money – he felt like he could see the true meaning behind what Enokida said.

“.....Actually, why do you know that?” Lin did not recall ever mentioning the price for the job. Lin frowned. *As always, he’s a guy who just knows everything.*

The meeting with the Shouwan took place in the VIP room of a club called Eve in Nakasu. Li attended as a stand-in for the head of the organization and naturally Suzuki came as well. The negotiations went smoothly. They established to forbid anyone from killing their members, ensuring the safety of their people. The man Tony Lau was meek and civil, but they felt behind that facade he was fearful. As Zhao had said, they must be afraid of the possible group backing them. There was almost no possibility of them interfering with the Kakyuu Group again.

Having finished with the negotiations, Li got into the back seat of the car and gave a sigh of exhaustion and relief.

“Suzuki,” he called him by his name. Suzuki thought he would ask for a cigarette, but he was mistaken. “You did well.”

“No,” Suzuki shook his head while still facing forward. “This was thanks to Zhao.”

He did not do anything in this case. He just did as that man had instructed.

“That killer Zhao seems to have utility.”

“Yes, more or less.”

That man was excellent. He was young but skilled. He was just as Yang described him. Although, he was a tad bit insane and a loose canon.

“It is a little unfortunate he’ll have to be killed.”

Suzuki swallowed at Li’s words he heard from behind him. “.....Indeed.”

What a waste, he thought. For him to have that much ability only to be wasted. However, it had to be done. Because he was talented they had to get rid of him. It was a dilemma for them.

“Well then, tell him about the case.”

After he dropped Li off at his home per usual, Li told him that before getting out.

“Yes, I will.” Suzuki nodded slightly. “As we arranged.”

He immediately made a call to Zhao.

“Why did you call me so suddenly?”

After waiting for ten minutes for the other to arrive at a cafe in downtown Tenjin where he first met him, Zhao finally appeared.

“I thought I’d give you what you have asked for.” Suzuki took out a USB drive.

“There are five hundred files of personal data on this. It has the person’s name, address, year and date of birth, and their phone number.”

Suzuki provided him with a list of personal data on individuals he purchased from a registry broker. Unoyama, who was killed the day prior, had this list. Unoyama’s office earned small cash through fraud this way. After they made a call from the list, they would instigate them to take money.

“Use it as you please.” Suzuki urged him.

“Then I will with pleasure.”

Zhao took it.

“.....What do you plan to do?”

When Suzuki asked him, Zhao grinned. “I’m going to kill Noriaki Hayashi (林憲明).”

“Noriaki Hayashi?” Suzuki questioned what he heard.

“I’m going to kill the man with that name.”

Suzuki could not grasp the intent behind this man’s actions. *What could he possibly gain by killing some Noriaki Hayashi?* “Why would you do that?”

“To inform him. That I’m looking for him. When the news announces someone with the same spelling as him had been killed, he’ll take notice of that. I bet he’ll come and find me because of it.”

His way of thinking was insane.

“See you. Thanks for this.” Zhao flicked the USB drive and got up from his seat.

“Wait,” Suzuki gave him a stern voice. He needed to tell him. “My superior wants to thank you personally for this past case. He reserved a seat for you.”

“.....Really?”

“It’s at a traditional Japanese restaurant in Nakasu Ni-Choume. It’ll be at one o’clock in the afternoon tomorrow. Don’t be late.”

“You guys are really treating me to something nice.” Zhao left while waving his hand carelessly.

The meet up place with Lau was at the dock at Ohori Park like last time. Nitta received the sudden call and headed over there immediately. Lau was already there waiting for Nitta. However, unlike last time, his expression was not calm.

They got on the swan boat as last time, and Lau began to speak as they peddled into the center of the lake. “We have talked to the Kakyuu Group. We have agreed to form a truce without adding anymore casualties to either party.However, they have listed off one condition.”

“A condition?”

“They told us to hand them over the hitman.”

“That’s-”

In other words, they wanted Saruwatari.

“The Kakyuu Group has a connection with that killer. They want to punish him with their own hands.”

“.....I see.” His bill was due for cutting down a hundred of their men then.

“However, that is the same for us.”

While it was the Shouwan that had thrown the first punch, Lau also had

received casualties. Their warehouse was attacked by a killer from the Kakyuu Group and four of their comrades were killed.

“We also want to avenge our fallen comrades. So we settled to exchange the killer at the end of negotiations. Naturally, while alive.”

They planned the exchange for tomorrow. It was a tight schedule.

“Here,” Lau handed him a see-through vinyl bag with white, fine powder inside.

“It’s a sleeping drug. Have Saruwatari drink something with this in it and bring him to the warehouse.”

This man was going to sacrifice Saruwatari. Nitta grimaced in his mind while he etched a smile on his face. This has gotten troublesome.

After they got off the boat, Nitta called Saruwatri right away. “Hello, Sarucchi?” He had to invite him out as naturally as possible. “Would you like to eat out together tomorrow?”

The dressed up restaurant attendee guided them into a private room labeled Ume no Ma. They opened the sliding doors and stepped inside the spacious tatami floored room. Li and Zhao sat down facing each other while Suzuki sat next to Li. As a precaution, they stationed a subordinate to stand on watch at the entrance.

“I have heard from Suzuki. You have worked splendidly for us in this past case.”

Li told him and set a duralumin case onto the table. He opened the case and showed Zhao its contents. Inside were stacks of bills packed in tightly.

“I said I don’t need it. My objective isn’t the money.” Zhao laughed. He would not even glance at the case.

“It’s a measure of our thanks. Please take it. We were saved because of you.”

Li then lifted up his glass.

“I have brought us some nice sake to share. Let’s have a toast.”

He poured the Japanese sake into two sake cups and handed one over to

Zhao.

“.....Now then, in celebration of our victory. Cheers.”

Li held up his sake cup. He downed the drink in one go. Zhao also imitated the gesture and brought it to his lips.

But he unnaturally stilled in the next moment. And then he smirked.

It was a surprise attack. Zhao suddenly grabbed the lackey beside him by the collar, and once he lifted him up he poured the contents of the cup down his throat. The man immediately began to heave in pain. Foam bubbled out of his mouth, and he convulsed on the tatami floor with his eyes rolled back.

“You tried to dupe me?” Zhao flashed his teeth in a grin. “You’re naive.”

Suzuki’s eyes widened.

He saw through us?

In their negotiations with the Shouwan they had decided to exchange their hitmen. However, if they handed him over alive, their enemy would gain a valuable fighter. They planned to hand over his body with the explanation of ‘the killer died in an unfortunate accident.’ And that was why they had to eliminate Zhao. They laced poison onto the sake cup.

However, he had noticed it.

“I can recognize poison by smell. I was trained to do so.”

Zhao moved. He took the sake cup he held and threw it at Suzuki. By the time Suzuki had dodged it, Zhao had already reached Li’s side. It was only one moment. Zhao took out something long and thin from his pocket and stuck it into Li’s neck. It was a syringe. A clear liquid was injected into Li’s vein.

“Li-san!”

Suzuki shouted and pulled out his gun.

“Get away from him!”

Zhao raised his open palms to him when Suzuki pointed the gun at him.

“Hold on there. Don’t shoot, okay? If I die, then your precious master will too.”

“.....What do you mean?”

Suzuki frowned. Both of his arms were shaking. He was unsure whether it was from anxiety or resentment.

Li pulled out the syringe from his neck and grimaced. “.....Poison.”

“It’s a virus. I stole it before the Shouwan could release it. I also have the anti-virus. It’s hidden in a certain place. You have a week of incubation. If you don’t receive the anti-virus in that time frame, then you’ll die.”

“That’s-”

Suzuki was taken aback. Renyi’s face flashed through his mind.

“What the hell have you done?!”

He yelled and grabbed Zhao by the collar.

‘Quickly, bring him over here!’

The scene had turned into an uproar. Banba strained to hear the conversation going in and out. It appeared that Li had been poisoned and was down for the count. His subordinates were trying to bring him to a hospital.

Tranquility returned a few minutes later. The two remaining men in the room were conversing.

‘By the way, I wouldn’t use this restaurant again.’

He noticed, huh.

Banba tutted in his mind.

‘This thing was hidden here.’

‘.....What is that? A cell phone?’

‘It’s a listening bug in the model of a cell phone.’

‘A listening bug?’ The other man was surprised. From the conversation he must have been Suzuki. ‘There’s no way. I had my subordinates check this room beforehand.’

‘This kind of bug doesn’t omit electromagnetic waves, so it’s difficult to pick it up even if you use a detector. Even by the chance you find it, the device works

as a camouflage as a customer's lost item in a place like this.'

'What? But that's.....'

'In other words, it means our conversations up until this point had all been eavesdropped on. I don't know by whom though.'

There was a crunch sound, and the transmission cut off there. The device itself must have been crushed.

However, that was not the only bug implemented in there. Banba heard the voices in the earphone in his opposite ear.

'Now we can speak without restraint, right?'

He had set up bugs together with the food by paying the restaurant's employees. The cell phone type listening device was just a decoy. He did not plan to use it for a long period of time as it was about to run out of power anyway. Now he was left with the alternative ones.

'Why did you try to poison me?'

'.....We made a deal with the Shouwan. We decided to trade both of our killers.'

'I see. So you devised a plan to kill me before you handed me over to your enemy.'

Shouwan, deal, killers. The face of that man suddenly came to Banba's mind. There was the possibility that Saruwatari could be transferred over to the Kakyuu Group right about now. Except, it was that man. He would not be captured that easily.

'Where is the anti-virus?'

'I won't tell you. You'll be working with me in this next week. If you behave yourself, I'll cure him.'

Dammit, Suzuki cursed. And there their conversation had ended. They must have left the restaurant.

Thanks to the listening devices, Banba learned which hospital Li was taken to. However, the rest of the Kakyuu Group members were probably with him.

Banba could not approach recklessly. So he headed back to his office once more. Lin still had not returned. *Just where on earth is he?*

Banba sat down on the sofa and opened up a newspaper. It was the local paper of Western Japan. He checked the sports section first. There was a huge report about a certain foreign player. He had fallen into a slump with his batting, having been prevented from managing another home run one point away from beating his previous record.

Just as he was looking over the front page casually, he spotted the characters 林憲明. A man under that name was stabbed to death in Fukuoka City.

“Eh.” Banba unconsciously raised his voice.

It can't be, he thought. He quickly read through the article.

The victim was –

“Noriaki, Hayashi? Seventy-three years old.....”

It was someone else.

Just my imagination then, Banba sighed and placed a hand on his chest in relief.

“.....Dontcha scare me like that.”

He then glanced over to the article next to it. It was a similar murder case.

“Eh.”

He raised his voice in alarm. He doubted his eyes reading through its contents.

There were two murder cases that had happened in the city. Both of the men who were killed had the same name.

“.....What the heck is this?”

The victims were Noriaki Hayashi. *Were these just coincidences? Or perhaps they were—*

Banba had an unsettling feeling about this. He immediately made a call. “Ah, hello, Enokida? I got somethin’ that I need you to look into.”

Suzuki did not want to see his master lying on top of a white bed, so he sent a subordinate in his place to the hospital.

Several minutes later, he received a call from him. 'We have the results of his examination.'

"Go on."

'He is currently stable and conscious.' He added with a gloomy tone. '.....For the meantime that is.'

For the meantime. However, they did not know what would happen in a week. ".....I got it."

Then Suzuki's first priority was to retrieve the anti-virus.

"Stay by his side for now. It may be dangerous until we take care of the Shouwan, so be on your guard."

'Understood.'

After Suzuki finished the call outside of the restaurant, he headed back to the private room and opened the sliding doors to Unoyama. Zhao was inside. He sat improperly with one knee up while scarfing down food.

"Hey, welcome back." He noticed Suzuki and raised one hand. "This food is amazing stuff. You should have some too."

Suzuki felt anger boil up at his carefree nature. ".....I want to kill you right now."

Zhao cackled. "Alright, calm down now. Ah, that's right. Would you like a drink? Don't worry. It's not laced with poison."

Suzuki glared at him as he raised a sake cup to him with a cheerful voice.

"Well then, I guess we should get going." Zhao finished eating and stood up. He then ordered Suzuki. "Bring the car over. I have a place I want to go to."

This is a disgrace. Being ordered around by this man. Nonetheless, Suzuki had no choice but to follow through with it. "Where to?"

"Hakozaki Go-Choume. I'm going to meet an old friend."

Saruwatari was more insufferable than usual as he downed his cola at the

creative cuisine restaurant near Ohori Park Station.

It can't be helped, Nitta thought. The Kakyuu Group ended up withdrawing after that prolonged ceasefire. To Saruwatari, this job was a mess. He really only got to kill one person for his test, so he did not make much money. And then he was drowning in the ocean (though he claimed he was swimming). His frustration was left unsatisfied and his contract had ended with the Shouwan without a chance to dissolve it.

“.....What amateur. I'm gonna kill that red-headed bastard myself!”

Saruwatari downed the contents of his glass in one go and slammed it down onto the table. Nitta worried if there would be a crack on the bottom of the glass.

“What will you have next?”

“Cola.” Saruwatari was curt.

Nitta called for a shop attendee and made the order. “Ahh, dammit. I wanna kill someone.” The shop attendee was startled to hear Saruwatari whisper that.

“Come on now, just forget about the job and have fun for today. It's my treat too.”

“.....I'm gonna head to the restroom.” Saruwatari stood up and began walked towards the bathroom.

His refill of cola was brought over. Nitta took out the drug he had been given – and he did verify it earlier that it was indeed a sleeping drug – and put it in the glass while Saruwatari was gone. After a while Saruwatari came back. He did not appear to have noticed. He took his new glass and brought it to his mouth. The cola mixed with the sleeping drug went down his throat and spread throughout his body.

Several minutes later, Saruwatari collapsed onto the table. He was completely out of it.

“.....Really, Sarucchi? You've drank way too much for the daytime.” Nitta raised his voice on purpose. He called to a shop attendant who happened to be passing by.

“Excuse me, I would like to pay.”

Seventh Inning

Top of Seventh Inning

“I need money at any cost.”

Again? He thought. Everyone and anyone just wanted money. I want money, I need money, money, money, money – As soon as they speak they brought up money. It was annoying to him.

“My daughter has an illness.....”

Is that so? How unfortunate. While he etched a smile on his face while in front of his client, he gave a sigh in his mind. *So what of it?*

He did not care about the reason. He had no interest in the objective as to why they wanted money. Regardless whether it was for a noble reason or not, there was only one thing to do.

“I don’t have time. We need to put her in surgery right away.”

Yes, yes, I got it. I will help you in your case. Nitta as always put on a gentle smile for these instances.

The sum and objective would always vary, but the truth was, everyone needed money. And for that they even killed people. That was what human beings were. In this world you could even buy a life with money. Whether someone got to live or die was all dependent on money. The whole world ran on money.

And while he criticized it he did not lament over it either. Presently he was one of those people in such a world. After all, he had been making a living by taking the leftovers of the sum hitmen made.

It was just equivocal and boring. That was what he thought. Although he believed in that, he also continued on with his tedious work without making any attempt to change it.

Until the day he reunited with that man again.

“I want to fight strong guys.”

Saruwatari had said that nonchalantly. And with the same expression from that time – the time when he proclaimed “I’ll become a pro.”

Who knew there was such an idiot out there. In this industry. Nitta could not fathom it.

He’s an interesting man, he thought. This was the second time he thought that about him. He did not change at all from their high school days. This man would give it his all without caring for any beneficial merits.

As always he’s a strange man. I won’t get bored with him.

“I’ll make you into the number one killer in Fukuoka as a consultant.”

Before he had noticed it, those words spilled out of his mouth.

“Let’s team up again. The two of us. Like in the past.”

So please, entertain me once more.

Bottom of Seventh Inning

“Good morning, Sarucchi.”

Saruwatari heard Nitta’s voice dazedly among his vague consciousness.

“Although I say that, it is actually late in the evening already.”

He could not move; he appeared to be tied up. He was bound by handcuffs behind his back and was seated in a chair. His vision came into clear focus soon after. He could see Nitta in front of him. Next to him was Tony Lau.

Saruwatari turned his head to look around them. There were cardboard boxes stacked up against the walls – it was a familiar place.

This was the Shouwan’s warehouse.

The bodies on the floor from earlier were gone, and the floors and walls that were splattered with blood were also cleaned up. It must have been taken care of by the street cleaners.

More than that, Saruwatari recalled. *What is this situation? What happened? Why am I here?* Saruwatari searched through his memories of what happened until now. He had a meal with Nitta and went to use the restroom. After he

came back, he drank his cola beverage. He only remembered up until that point. Immediately following that he felt a sudden, strong sense of drowsiness, and his consciousness pulled away from him.

And now he was in this present situation.

“You were sound asleep. I must have misjudged the amount.” Nitta was smiling.

It can't be. The cola was the cause of it? This man drugged me?

Saruwatari's eyes widened for a moment before he glared him down.

“.....Nao.” Unable to hold in his anger, he said in a lower pitch than usual. “What's the meaning of this?”

“Well, you see,” Nitta was calm, which irked Saruwatari.

“It's been decided you're to be handed over to the Kakyuu Group.”

“.....Ah?” Saruwatari frowned at the unbelievable statement. “What did you say just now?”

“It is unfortunate,” Lau scowled. He took out his gun and pointed it to Saruwatari. “But we'll have you die here.”

No way in hell! Saruwatari gritted his teeth.

“You are alright with this, right? Nitta-san?”

Lau looked over to Nitta.

Nitta did not nod. “Is it alright to not hand him over to the Kakyuu Group alive?”

“It's insurance. The moment we hand him over to the Kakyuu Group, this man will change sides, and we may have more casualties in turn, right?” Lau smirked. “We did plan to hand this killer over to the Kakyuu Group alive. However, he managed to get out of his bonds in the middle of transit and attacked us. So we had to unintentionally kill him. That will be our story.”

“However, that wouldn't be true to the contract.”

“Yes, that is correct. I greatly apologize, Nitta-san, for getting rid of your main source of revenue. So here is this in apology.”

He handed Nitta a large duralumin case. From the size, at least a few 10,000,000 yen must be inside it.

“Would you accept this in repayment?” Lau’s tone was forced. “If you say that will not suffice, then you will have to just cope with it. It would be better for your own sake to accept the money right now as well.”

“You sure have a roundabout way of getting to the point.” Nitta smiled bitterly. “You could just say if I don’t obey you’ll kill me.”

“I thought it would be understood without saying.” Lau smiled lightly. “And didn’t you say it yourself? That killers are just tools for making money. Losing one of them would surely not hinder that, right?”

“.....Yes, I suppose so.”

Nitta nodded with a smile and took the case.

“It is as you say. He is a tool. I will gratefully accept this money.”

Saruwatari could not believe it. He narrowed his eyes. *He sold me out.*

“And now.”

Nitta walked up to beside the bound Saruwatari. He placed his arms around his shoulders from behind and whispered into his ear. “Sorry, Sarucchi.”

“.....Don’t touch me, you shit!” Saruwatari glared at him. “I’ll kill you.”

“How frightening,” Nitta stepped back while smiling when Saruwatari threatened him, baring his teeth.

Lau held the gun up in front of him. The next moment when he placed a finger on the trigger, he heard a gunshot go off.

“Welcome.” When Lin pulled back the curtains to the food stall Genchan, the owner Genzo greeted him with a smile. “You’re alone today? That sure is rare of ya. Banba ain’t with you?”

“.....Yeah, he isn’t,” Lin said deceptively. Genzo must not know that Lin left Banba yet.

Another customer came in as he was slurping his ramen. It was a man wearing a suit; his necktie was undone, and he held his jacket in his right hand. He was

in his mid-thirties to forties. Looking at him closer, he was a familiar man – Shigematsu.

When he spotted Lin he raised his voice. “Oh, there you are Lin. Perfect timing. I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Talk?” That was rare. Lin put down his chopsticks and turned towards him. “What about?”

“It’s about you,” Shigematsu worded the question as though it was something difficult to say. “Do you have anyone that has a grudge against you?”

“.....Ha? Have a grudge?”

There were so many that no one came to mind. Since he was a killer, he naturally would be hated by someone. That was what he would reply with normally, but right now that man’s face appeared in his mind. Along with the memories from six years ago.

“Why would you ask me that so suddenly?”

When he asked for the reason, Shigematsu explained awkwardly.

“Truth is, two men named Noriaki Hayashi were murdered yesterday.”

“.....Noriaki Hayashi?”

Noriaki Hayashi – the reading of its spelling was different, but it had the same characters as his. *It can’t be. Is this just a coincidence? Or is it-*

“Serial murders of Noriaki Hayashis.” Genzo stated jokingly.

“They are identical cases. The method was even the same. Look at this; these are the photos of the victims’ faces.”

He handed over two photos to Lin. They appeared to be ID photos.

“Do these two look familiar?”

Lin did not recognize them at all. He shook his head. “Unfortunately, no. I don’t know them.”

“The weapon was a blade, and both men were struck through the heart. If we consider the culprit hit that vital spot without hesitation, then there is a possibility of it being a pro’s work.”

“A blade, huh.” Genzo groaned, placing his hand to his chin. “What kind do you reckon’?”

“From the autopsy results, it’s unknown.” Shigematsu drank a non-alcoholic beer, probably because he had to drive. He gulped it down in one go before continuing. “After the culprit stabbed Noriaki Hayashi in the heart, he stabbed them in the left eye.”

“Their left eye?”

Lin had an epiphany when Shigematsu mentioned that.

“Then it’s.....”

If they crushed the eye after killing them, then torturing them was not the objective. The reason they stabbed their left eye – Lin presently had a hunch. “Do you have any photos of the bodies?”

“Sure do. They’re important, got it?”

Shigematsu took out the data on the cases from his bag. Photos were piled inside, all taken at the scenes of the crimes. A man was collapsed in the center of the room, bleeding out. Blood dripped from his crushed left eye, and it looked like he was crying.

“This body is-”

Lin swallowed.

It’s similar to that time.

“Then it is him.”

He confirmed it. It’s him. Feilang. It has to be that man’s work.

The meaning behind crushing the left eye was devised as a message. Feilang is calling for me.

“Do you know something?”

Ignoring Shigematsu, Lin bolted up from his seat.

I have to go.

“Ah, hey, dontcha eat and run off without payin’!” Genzo yelled at Lin as he

took off.

“Heeey, I’ll arrest you red handed!” Shigematsu added.

Lin turned to them and replied while waving his right hand, “sorry! I’ll pay later!”

He knew where Enokida was. He was in booth 506 in the internet cafe from earlier. After he knocked on the door multiple times, he opened it in haste.

“What’s up? How come you’re so flustered?” Enokida turned around while taking off his headset. “Ah, that’s right. Look at this. This is a new model I made. It’s the redback spider telecommunicator. With two of them, we can make-”

“Besides that!”

Lin cut off Enokida.

“I know his target.....I know what Feilang is after.” After taking in measured breaths, he stated. “Me.”

“You?”

“He is looking for me. He may plan to take revenge on me. He has killed two men with names similar to mine.”

“Ahh,” Enokida nodded. He seemed to have known. He typed on his keyboard and pulled up news article in question. “These ones, right? The serial killing of Noriaki Hayashi. I was intrigued and looked a bit into it.”

“Probably another Noriaki Hayashi will be killed. He’s trying to bring me out.”

Feilang probably would not stop with the murders until he found Lin.

“So what do you plan to do?”

“I’ll do as he wishes and go meet up with him.” There was no other way in stopping that man.

“But look here,” Enokida told him while typing quickly on his keyboard. “I tried finding that Feilang guy, but he isn’t anywhere. He doesn’t even have a registry for entering the country.”

“He’s someone who died before. He may have changed his ID and name, and there’s the chance that he got into the country illegally.” He would not allow

himself to be easily found.

“If I kept comparing all the faces shown on the surveillance cameras across Fukuoka with Feilang’s photo, I think I’d be able to find him eventually.” Enokida gave a forced sigh. “Although that would take a lot of time, even for me.”

They did not have time to wait around. Another Noriaki Hayashi would be killed in that time. Lin suddenly thought up an idea. They just had to do the opposite. “Even if we don’t know where Feilang is, if we can predict where he’d go next, then we may find him.”

“I see,” Enokida seemed to catch on to Lin’s idea. “In other words, we have to guess which Noriaki Hayashi he’d likely go after next and get there before he does.”

“Yeah,” Lin nodded. “I want you to predict with that brain of yours the next target Feilang will go to kill.”

“Profiling is outside my area of expertise though.”

He began to type on the keyboard rapidly again.

“First, let’s see how many Noriaki Hayashis are in Fukuoka City.”

After a while –

“.....Here they are. Whoa, there are twenty-five of them.”

The character “hayashi” was a common last name, and “Noriaki” was not that rare of a name either. There were twenty-five people in total. They had to guess the third victim from them. He was intimidated by it.

“There should be a common thread between the two victims.” Enokida said in a murmur.

A common thread. Lin recalled the photos Shigematsu shown him. Neither victims had any similar facial features. One victim had a single-edged eyelids and a glint to his eyes, the other victim had wide eyes. The first one was slim and the other was fat. Lin could not see a consistency. Feilang must have not chosen them based on their physical features.

“How about their ages?”

Lin asked him, and Enokida told him while reading through the news article. "The first victim was seventy-three years old. The other was thirty."

"Their addresses?"

"Central Fukuoka and Sawara ward. These are so scattered."

Their families, blood type, birth place and schools were all different. They looked up every bit of information they could think of, but they could not find a common thread.

Just as they were frustrated on the matter, ".....Well now," Enokida put his hands together and cracked his knuckles. "I guess I'll just have to poke around then."

He started hacking into websites. His fingers danced over the keyboard with incredible speed.

"What are you looking into?"

"I'm comparing their credit card transaction records. I may be able to find something from them."

A few minutes later, Enokida had raised his voice. "There it is. I found a common thread between the two. They purchased health foods through the same mail-order firm. It's a company that sells diet food and supplements." He grinned. "This company had a list of patrons that had been leaked some time ago."

Now that he mentioned it, Lin felt like he had seen that article in a newspaper before.

"A temporary worker hired to process accepting orders had the list of names and sold it to someone else. It was then distributed to an underground organization. Immediately following it there was an increase in fake phone calls of fraud and malignant door-to-door selling. It's still on the news occasionally even now."

"So Feilang has gotten that registry too, then?"

And he was killing anyone listed as Noriaki Hayashi residing in Fukuoka City from it.

“That possibility is high. As long as you have money, it’s easy to obtain. I have one too.”

Enokida inserted his USB drive into his laptop and opened a file. Inside were a list of individuals’ names and addresses lined out in a row.

“This is a registry of patron names. There are 1,000,000 data in here. So when we search for any Noriaki Hayashi living in Fukuoka City.....Oh, there are three. Two are the recent victims in the recent cases. Seems we hit the jackpot.”

“That means his next target is this last one.”

“Noriaki Hayashi, forty-one. His address is in Hakozaki 5-Choume in the eastern ward of Fukuoka.”

There was the sound of a gunshot which resounded through the vast warehouse. The smell of gunpowder smoke grazed his nostrils.

It was the first time he shot someone with a gun. He always carried one on him, but it was just a small handgun which was used as a means of self-defence. Nonetheless, he felt the recoil of the shock when he pulled the trigger, his arm becoming steadily numb.

The shot Nitta had fired hit Lau in his right hand, making him drop the gun he held far away from him. Blood was trickling down Lau’s arm. His face contorted from the sharp pain. He dropped to the ground, groaning.

Saruwatari’s eyes were wide open in shock. He looked between Nitta and Lau with a dazed expression. Nitta walked over to Saruwatari. The moment Saruwatari was released from his bonds, he punched Nitta in the face.

“Ow!” Nitta yelped and held his nose. “That hurt, Sarucchi.....You hit me real good.”

Saruwatari was obviously displeased. “You betrayed me, you bastard.”

“Didn’t I say I’m sorry? Just earlier.” He rubbed his nose and corrected himself. “Besides, I didn’t betray you. This was part of my plan.”

He could not have Saruwatari be in on the act because he was so easy to read. In order to have him play the ‘captive killer who was set up by his partner’ naturally, he had to keep everything silent from him, but this may have ended

with the other losing trust in him.

Right now, he thought to let Lau go though.

“You did give in to your emotions, you bastard.....!”

Lau yelled. He glared at Nitta resentfully.

“Not really, that is not the case.”

“Then why did you save him?! You said killers were just tools to you!”

Nitta gave Lau a gentle smile as he raved at him.

“I have a principle of taking care of my tools.”

If Saruwatari was a killer working for just for money, he may have abandoned him. However, for only this man would he find it regrettable. Nitta wanted to see how stronger he would get or how far up to the top he would make it.

In the end, they were of the same stripe. *I'm an idiot*, he ridiculed himself.

“Who’s a tool, now?”

Nitta heard the voice dripping with anger. When he turned around, Saruwatari was deeply frowning at him. He had taken out kunai from his jacket. He sliced open Lau’s throat for the finishing blow. Lau made a pitiful cry with his last breath.

Saruwatari opened the case with the money inside, and after checking its contents he clicked his tongue.

“There’s about 50,000,000 yen in here. You were going to sell me off with this much small change?”

Saruwatari glared at him from the side, but Nitta quickly corrected it.

“I said I didn’t. This is a misunderstanding. All of it was just an act. Besides, there’s no way I’d actually betray you, right?”

“Hmph.”

I wonder about that, Saruwatari snorted. He did not appear to believe him at all.

“It’s okay though. Since I turned on him.”

“.....No it aint’.”

Nitta could not change how Saruwatari felt about this. “You’ll get twenty percent,” Saruwatari had picked up the case and stated that plainly.

“Wha?”

“That’s your share. I’ll take eighty percent, and you’ll take twenty percent.”

“Ehhh, isn’t that too little? Give me at least thirty percent.”

“Then 15.2 percent.” He lowered it even further.

“What’s with that number? That’s a number a clumsy batter would make.”

“If you don’t like it, then I’ll kill you.”

“That’s awful.....” Even when he slumped his shoulders, Saruwatari did not budge. *There’s no helping it then.* Nitta reluctantly accepted the deal. There was nothing else he could do to please this man.

“Alright then, what will you do next?” Nitta changed the topic. “You heading back to Kokura?”

“Not yet. I have something I want to finish still.”

“Something you want to finish?”

Saruwatari rolled his shoulders back, “I’m going to kill that red-headed bastard.”

He said with a villainous expression more so than usual.

Lin got out at the taxi at the address Enokida had given him and headed into Noriaki Hayashi’s home. It was on the second floor of the seven story apartment building in Hakozaeki 5-Choume eastern ward. The door was unlocked. Lin had infiltrated countless homes until this point, but he never once felt resistance or hesitation in doing so. And yet, today he felt unusually nervous. Lin turned the doorknob slowly with shaking fingers.

Without stepping foot into the house he saw a silhouette. A man was collapsed right in front of the entrance. He was dead. He was stabbed in the heart and his left eye was crushed. He was in the same state as the other victims. He must have been the owner of this apartment, Noriaki Hayashi.

I was a step too late.

Lin tutted. Another victim came out of this. But then he suddenly felt another person's presence. He heard someone talking from the living room. It was the sound of the television.

He cautiously headed further inside. He quietly opened the door as to not make a sound.

Someone's here.

There was a man in the room. He was sitting on the sofa, watching the TV. He noticed Lin's presence and turned it off. He got to his feet slowly and turned towards him languidly.

Their eyes met, and the breath was caught in Lin's throat.

"Feilang.....!"

The man in front of him was without a doubt Feilang. He grew bigger and gained the facial features of an adult now, but he still had the same features from six years ago. The red burning color that was his hair had remained the same as well.

You really were alive?

Now having him stand in front of him, Lin truly felt the impact head on.

"It's been awhile, Maomei." Feilang spoke.

Maomei was his old name. Lin had not been called that in a long time.

"You finally came." The pitch to his voice was must lower now. "You made me wait for quite some time."

".....So all of them was your handiwork."

It was just as Lin thought: this man was also the one who killed the two other Noriaki Hayashi.

Lin glanced over to the direction the entrance was at and frowned remorsefully. "You killed three people in order to bring me out?"

"Unfortunately, I forgot to exchange numbers with you." Feilang cracked a joke brazenly.

“You should have had other means of reaching out to me. You didn’t have to involve innocent peo-”

“And what’s wrong with it?”

Feilang interrupted Lin and smirked.

“That won’t stop me from achieving my objective. I’ll take as many of people’s lives as I need to do so. No matter who the person is, I’ll kill them without any hesitation. That’s what killers are, right? It was what I learned at that place.”

And you as well, Feilang narrowed his eyes.

Lin did not have anything he could say back in reply and remained silent.

That was indeed what they had learned at that place – that factory. They had no choice in the matter to pass the exam. It did not matter that his opponent was his friend; Lin killed him.

At least, he should have killed him.

“.....Why are you alive?”

“You want to know?” Feilang tattled on without waiting for Lin’s reply. “I’ll tell you. What happened to me since then.”

Feilang sat down on the sofa again and kicked out his leg.

“I was still alive on that day when you stabbed me. However, the guards that cleaned up the bodies didn’t realize that. So I was sold to a specialist along with all the other failures of the exam. It was someone who purchased bodies. And that man brought me, who was at death’s door, to an underground doctor.”

I see, Lin muttered. *Then I really was soft.*

“After my wound had healed, the same thing repeated again. I was sold to a wealthy and perverted old man. He bought three children including me, brought us to his home and tortured us. He had that as his hobby.”

His expression distorted somewhat.

“The other two couldn’t bear with the pain and died. Fortunately, I was immune to the torture. I received training for it after all. I pretended to be afraid to make that sadistic bastard let his guard down. I waited for the

opportune moment to make my strike.” Feilang glanced over to Lin and shrugged. “I had a harsh life. Thanks to your half-assed compassion, I had a taste of hell. It would have been better if you had killed me at that time.”

Feilang laughed jokingly, but it made Lin’s heart throb all the same. Unable to meet him in the eye, Lin casted his gaze downward.

“.....Do you hate me?”

He looked up to examine Feilang’s expression.

“No.”

He laughed back readily.

“How about we just leave the past behind us? I betrayed you and tried to kill you. You almost killed me. We’re even. Although, losing one of my eyes has been a huge liability for me physically.”

It was not what he had expected. Lin thought he would resent him to his core. He thought he was looking for him for revenge.

“Then what is your aim?”

There was no way he had called him out here after doing all that just to talk about old memories.

“I came to meet you.” Feilang got up and turned to face him. After he gave a small smile, he continued. “Won’t you team up with me?”

“Wha-?”

Lin stared wide-eyed wordlessly. However, he quickly frowned.

“.....What do you mean?”

Don’t be so cautious about it, Feilang smiled bitterly.

“It’s true that I continually lied to you. I made you let your guard down. But turn it the other way around, that just meant I respected you. You had great grades for the exams and were talented. I didn’t think I’d win against you without deceiving you. Our state of minds weren’t good at the time. You understand it right?”

The closed-off atmosphere, the harsh environment, and the brainwashing-like

training. That place was abnormal. And everyone in there was mad in some aspect.

“I was serious when I said I wanted to work together with you. I thought we’d be a great team.”

Feilang walked over to him and wrapped an arm around Lin. “Hey, Mao.”

He got close to his face and whispered in his ear. “Let’s work together. How about we go around the world and make easy money? We survived that hell, so if we team up we’d be invincible.”

That was unfair to say. You’d say that at a time like this? Are you trying to revive that dream from then?

However, it was too late for that.

“.....No.”

That word fell from his lips unconsciously. He brushed off Feilang’s arm and backed away.

“Why?” Feilang frowned. “Because I betrayed you once?”

“No, it’s not.....That’s not it.” Lin shook his head and repeated. “I won’t team up with you.”

If he took Feilang’s hand here, then he would never return again.

“You’d be able to live a luxurious life. More than what you have right now.”

“Money isn’t the issue.”

He was surprised at the words that came out of his mouth himself. *That’s exactly what he mentioned earlier*, he smiled bitterly. *Money isn’t the only thing to tie people down.*

“I won’t go with you.” Lin looked at him dead on and proclaimed strongly. “I don’t want to leave this city. I like it here.”

“.....What did you say?” Feilang frowned at Lin’s response. He then laughed. “You like this city? Is that a joke? What are you saying? You’re a killer.”

“Even a killer has things they like.”

“You were taught not to get attached, remember?”

He did not forget. *Don't get attached to anything. Don't have meaningless emotions.* Those will be your weakness. That was what the instructor had told them.

However, it was already too late for that. He had already developed those meaningless emotions.

“.....I've finally been able to find myself thinking that I enjoy it recently.”

He learned the rules and improved his skills. He even learned the signs. He also did not hate the uniform he wore.

Besides, if I'm not here then they can't be in any games. They would all be sad about that. I don't want to let that go: my current life.

“Ah? What are you saying?”

Feilang knitted his brows.

“At any rate, I won't team up with you.” Lin repeated back with a strong conviction. “Leave here. I don't want to see you in front of me again. Please.”

Feilang did not answer. After a few moments of silence, he smiled.

“.....This city, huh.”

An unsettling premonition arose in him at his suggestive smile.

“If you have lingering affections, then how about I destroy this city? Should I unleash a virus in Hakata Station, or how about I set a bomb in the subway?”

It was not just a threat. This man would do anything to get what he wanted, and Lin knew that most.

“Stop,” Lin demanded. “I'll have to kill you right now if you try.”

“Kill me? That brings back memories. That sounds fine by me. Do it.”

“I don't want to kill you.”

Please, he hung his head. *Please, don't make me kill you.*

“You don't want to kill?” Feilang repeated, not hiding his frustration. “A killer doesn't want to kill? What the hell's that? You've downgraded to a coward.”

Disappointment was shown on his face.

“.....I’ll have to remind you of back then.”

Feilang moved. He made a sharp kick, taking Lin by surprise. Unable to dodge the attack, he took the hit. The kick sunk into his side, and he was thrown into the wall from the force of it.

“Turn back into the old you.”

Relentless attacks fell upon him, but he could not fight back. He did not want to. At this rate, it was a one-sided battle.

Lin took out his knife-pistol, turned it towards Feilang and pulled the trigger. There was a gunshot, and the bullet passed by Feilang’s face and hit the window behind him. There was the shattering sound of glass.

Feilang glanced over to it and laughed, “where on earth were you aiming?”

This will do.

Lin dashed forward and slipped by Feilang. He went for a long jump, and leapt through the broken window with his arms raised to protect his head from the shards.

“Ngh.”

Numerous fragments of glass pricked his legs and arms. Once he jumped down onto the balcony, he jumped over the fence to the ground. However, he did not make a sound landing and twisted his ankle. *Shit*, he cursed. A sharp pain ran up his right leg. Lin continued running while limping slightly. He had to get away from that man. He grit his teeth and kept running.

After a while, he had reached his limit.

“.....Damn, that hurts.”

Lin collapsed. Above him was a highway. He rested against the overhead structure and watched his surroundings. There was no one around. Feilang was not coming after him. Lin must have managed to escape.

He spotted a prefab hut with a fence around it at a corner of the girder bridge. It was the best place to hide himself at. The door of the fence and the

door to the shop were unlocked. Lin trespassed inside and decided to rest here for the time being.

Now what should I do?

He took out his phone and turned it on. He had seven voicemails. All of them were from Banba. Noticing he was turning back to him, Lin slipped a wry smile.

“.....In the end I ask him for help?”

He pressed the call button.

“Oh, Banba, welcome.” Genzo addressed Banba cheerfully as he pulled back the curtains to the food stall and took his seat as usual. “Lin just came by earlier.”

“Lin-chan did?”

It seemed his roommate who had left him a profound note was alright. Banba was worried when he did not pick up any of his calls, but he was unexpectedly nearby still.

“Ah, Banba-san, did I make you wait?”

Enokida showed up just as Banba was slurping down his noodles at the edge seat.

“So this was a meetup now?” Genzo whispered, looking between the two.

Enokida took a seat next to him while Banba gave him the report of events. He told him that when he tailed Suzuki, Saruwatari had appeared and that there was a mutiny which put Li into the sickbed. After that the Kakyuu Group and the Shouwan had made an agreement to exchange their hitmen working for them.

“Huh, looks like it got really interesting.”

Enokida said cheerfully as usual.

“I learned a lot on my end too. As you asked, I looked into the Noriaki Hayashi serial murders.” Enokida reached for the splittable chopsticks when his ramen was placed in front of him. “Apparently it was the work of an acquaintance Lin-kun knows.”

“An acquaintance?”

“Yep.”

There was the snap of the chopsticks splitting. Enokida then put his chopsticks in his noodles, stuffed his mouth full and continued with the conversation while chewing on them.

“It was a plan devised by his old friend to call him out. He underwent training when he was younger, right?”

“Training?”

Now that he mentioned it, Banba recalled Lin saying that when he first met him. That he underwent training when he was nine years old.

“There was someone his age that was his roommate at the time.”

“Why is he lookin’ for Lin-chan now?”

“Maybe for a class reunion? This is his best friend. His name is Feilang.”

Enokida took out his tablet and showed the image of the man to him.

“This man is-”

Banba recognized him. He had red hair and a scar that ran over his left eye. He was the man who fought with Saruwatari – the killer hired by the Kakyuu Group.

“And where’s Lin-chan?”

“He said he’d go to meet with Feilang.”

This is bad, Banba frowned worriedly. Feilang had the Kakyuu Group behind him. He would like to say Lin would not fail though.

He took out his cell phone to make contact with Lin when he received an incoming call. It was from Lin himself. Banba pressed the button to accept the call immediately.

‘.....Hello?’ He heard Lin’s voice.

“Lin-chan?”

‘Yeah.’

Thank goodness, he’s alright. He sighed in relief. “Where’d ya wander off to

now? Hurry up and come back home.”

‘I can’t move.’

Banba frowned upon hearing his desperate voice. “.....What’s wrong?”

‘I’m hurt. I twisted my ankle and can’t walk for a bit. I’m bleeding, so I can’t take a taxi or train.Come get me.’

“You’re bleedin’?” Banba’s eyes widened. “What happened there?”

‘I got into a bit of a fight. It’s nothing too serious. Anyway, hurry up and get me.’

“Guess there’s no helpin’ it.” He sighed. “So where are you?”

‘Near Kaizuka Station. I’m beneath the overhead bridge of a highway.’

Banba had the general idea of where he was. “Just wait there. I’m gonna be over as soon as I can.”

I’ll call you when I get there, Banba told him and hung up.

“What’s the matter there?” Genzo leaned forward to listen.

“Lin-chan was attacked by someone.” Banba explained the details thoroughly. “He twisted his ankle and can’t move, so he asked me to come get him. I’ll be headin’ over there shortly.”

However, it could be an enemy’s trap. Feilang, Suzuki and the rest of the Kakyuu Group could be involved. There was room for caution. He considered taking an extra measure just in case. “Old man, I got a favor to ask of ya.”

Thirty minutes had passed since he called Banba for help. Just as he was wondering when he would show up, he got a call.

‘I’m here. Lin-chan, where are ya?’ It was Banba’s voice.

“In the prefab.”

‘.....Ahh, got it. I see it.’

Lin beared with the pain and stood up. He went outside of the hut and glanced around the area. On the other side of the street, he saw Banba. He was facing towards him with his cell phone pressed to his ear.

“Banba.”

Over here, Lin raised his hand to signal him down.

‘Oh, I see you.’

Banba noticed Lin and jogged over. But in the next moment there was a gunshot.

Banba came to a stop in an instant. His face grimaced, and he held his side. His white sweater slowly dyed red.

Lin knew right away that he was hit by a bullet. Banba was shot. His tall figure slowly slumped forward, and he collapsed.

Lin’s eyes widened, and he yelled.

“Ba-Banba!”

He ran over as he limped. Banba was lying on the ground a few meters from him. Banba was face down and bleeding out.

The moment Lin reached a hand towards him to touch him, he heard another man’s voice.

“What’s this Banba guy to you?”

Lin was taken aback and turned around.

“You-”

Feilang stood there. A thin trail of smoke emitted from the gun he held in his right hand. Lin tutted, *shit. I was followed?*

“Sorry about that. I meant to hit him in the leg, but I accidentally shot him in the torso. I’m not very good with guns. You know that right?” Feilang glanced at Lin and laughed.

“Feilang, you bastard.....!”

Just as he reached for his weapon, a gun was thrust at him “Don’t move.” Lin immediately stopped where he was and glared at the man in front of him.

Feilang asked him as he focused his attention on him. “Say, Mao. Who is he to you? From the phone conversation, I’d guess he’s either your friend or partner.

For you to call him for help immediately means you have quite a fair amount of trust in him.”

“You don’t mean-”

From the phone conversation? So he heard everything? The moment Feilang wrapped an arm around me – did he put a listening device on me? Lin had a realization and looked to his shoulder. A redback spider was clinging to the sleeve of his T-shirt.

Lin tutted. *Damn that mushroom*, he cursed. *He handed this over to him at some point.*

Out of nowhere several men in black attire appeared. They seemed to be Feilang’s allies. They surrounded Lin with their guns pointed at him.

“Hey,” Feilang pointed to Banba with his chin. “Bring him.”

The men obeyed the order. They picked up Banba’s senseless form and made their leave.

“Feilang!”

Lin shouted and drew close to Feilang.

“Wait! Where are you taking-”

The next moment, he took a strong impact to the head. Lin collapsed on the spot.

“Don’t worry. You’ll be taken together.” In his hazy consciousness, Lin heard Feilang’s laughter.

Eighth Inning

Top of Eighth Inning

His younger sister was killed. His mother died as well.

They were his treasured family. They were irreplaceable. And he lost them.

He left his family when he was nine years of age. He pushed through five years worth of intense training. He became a hitman and did work that made him close to danger on a daily basis. He fought with his foes and won every time. He discarded his heart and killed people. He killed, and he killed, and he killed. He continued cutting down people earnestly in order to survive in this world.

All of that was for his family. So that he could meet with his mother and sister again. So he could live with them again. He sacrificed himself, other people's lives, and dirtied his hands for his family's sake and their sake alone.

And yet, they were taken from him.

"Didn't you promise not to touch my family?!"

Lin's yell echoed in the office. His superior, Zhang, was a vulgar and cruel man. His lips curled into a smile. "Are you an idiot? You think a person who does not follow the law could keep a promise?"

This man stole the most important people from him that were worth more than his own life.

"You cannot kill me." Zhang stated with a triumphant look. "You're not a killer. You're just a murderer."

Lin bit into his lip at those words. *After stealing my family from me, you're going as far as to ridicule me too?!*

Don't joke with me. I'm a killer. I was brought up to become one since I was nine. I had already killed someone for payment by the time I was fourteen. I'm an authentic, professional killer. I'm not just some murderer.

Don't deny me.

Don't deny my life, my existence, and the five dreadful years I had to go through.

He wanted to kill him right then and there. He hated the man.

But he could not kill him.

"This serves you right, Lin."

That man looked down on him as he crawled on the ground.

He was unsightly. Pathetic. He wanted to cry at his pitiful self.

Just what have I been living for?

He felt like everything he did for those nineteen years were all for nothing. He lost all strength in his body.

"You damn kid. I'll tell you what happens when you make light of the adults."

It was game set. I lost.

He had already given up in his mind. I can't do this anymore. He closed his eyes. The tears that were welling up in his eyes fell.

"Dontcha cry now."

He abruptly heard a voice. It was a pleasant Hakata dialect. It was Banba's voice.

Lin slowly opened his eyes. He was in a car this time. He was in the backseat of Banba's car and was lying down unresisting. Banba's face reflected in the rearview mirror was gentle.

"I'm not crying." He replied weakly. There was no way he could cry. He had thrown away his heart.

"You're makin' a face of someone who thinks he can do ever'thing by himself, but people can't live alone."

Lin shook his head at Banba's words.

Even so, he had to live alone. That was what he was taught.

"You gotta learn to depend on others more."

Even if he asked for help, no one would. That was the world he lived in.

“I’ll take your request for five years worth of *mentaiko*.”

However, he did.

“Whatcha gonna do now?”

Lin was suddenly asked that as he was slurping down his cup ramen and put the chopsticks down. He was unsure how to reply. His sister’s revenge had been settled. He did not have any current objective either. Even if he returned to his country, he had no home there. All of his family was dead. He had no place to return to.

So what should I do?

I guess I could stay at a business hotel for a while until I can find a new place to stay. He considered to himself. *But can I rent a home?* It might be bothersome to deal with the whole registry problem. *And my ID is fake to begin with, and what if I’m caught as an illegal immigrant?*

He thought over what he should do in silence.

“You don’t got a place to go?”

Banba tilted his head to the side and peered at his face.

Well, if I have to say so, sure. Lin replied ambiguously.

“Then how ‘bout you stay here?”

He suggested that so matter of factly, Lin accidentally replied, “I guess so.”

“Then from today on this place will be your home.”

Banba showed his white teeth in a broad smile.

.....Absolutely not. Not in this filthy place.

Lin cursed, even though it was already too late.

Bottom of Eighth Inning

Was it his life flashing by? Memories of his past appeared up one after the other and vanished just as quickly.

Fully returning to consciousness, Lin slowly opened his eyes. The scenery around him came into pristine clarity. *Where am I?* Lin tilted his head slightly.

He was in a tasteless room with no furniture inside. It was just a spacious rectangular room without any windows and only one side had bars. The metal bars reached all the way to the ceiling, and Lin could see a door on the other side of them. He seemed to be in a jail cell.

His head throbbed. *That's right, I was hit. I must have lost consciousness and taken by Feilang, and now I'm locked up in here?*

Lin caught sight of a man lying on the ground a few meters away from him. It was Banba. He did not move an inch. He looked like a corpse, startling Lin. *Is he dead?*

"Banba!"

He yelled and rushed over to him. He got to his knees and roughly shook him.

"Banba! Hey, Banba!"

".....'nough with the ruckus."

Lin gave a sigh. "What the hell.....I thought you were dead."

"Yeah, I would've died then."

"Wha?"

"Look here." Banba was topless and had bandages wrapped around his from his broad chest to his stomach.

"Looks like someone treated us. They neatly sewed my wound too." Banba told him as he pointed to his injury covered by the bandages.

When Lin examined himself, he noticed there were bandages wrapped around his ankle as well. Someone attended to him while he was unconscious. He could not even feel pain from his twisted ankle. *I must have been given a shot of painkillers. Was that Feilang's work?*

"Why would he do this?"

"I reckon' that means he needs us alive for now. I don't got an idea what will happen later though."

What is Feilang planning? Lin had a bad feeling about their situation.

Even though they were in enemy territory, Banba was sprawled out on the

ground carelessly.

At any rate, we need to get out of here as fast as possible. Is there any means of escape? Lin examined every nook and cranny in their cell. However, he did not find anything. There were no openings in the walls or floor, and the bars were sturdy and did not move an inch. Giving up, Lin sat down next to Banba. For a while, they sat in silence.

“.....Say,” Unable to bear it, Lin spoke up. “You’re not going to ask me anything?”

Banba had lied down face up and only gave him a side glance. “Ask of what?”

“.....A lot of things.”

About me leaving or about Feilang for instance. There should be a lot of matters Banba would want to know about, but he seemed disinterested. “I’ll ask if there is something I want to.”

“.....It’s not that I wanted you to ask.”

Lin lied. He actually wanted to talk about it. He thought he should give an explanation to this man. More specifically, he wanted him to know.

“You liar. You want me to ask.” Banba chuckled. He sat up and leaned towards him. “So tell me. I’ll give money for the info if that’s whatcha want.”

He pulled out a thousand yen bill from somewhere and handed it to Lin. Lin was unsatisfied with his grinning face, but he had to talk about it. “.....I guess I don’t have much of a choice now.”

“Who was the fella who shot me?”

Lin answered Banba’s question while averting his gaze. “He’s Feilang.”

“Is he an acquaintance of yours?”

“Yeah. We grew up in the same establishment. He was my best friend.”

You got some wild friends, Banba shrugged.

“Feilang was kind to me. He was my one and only friend, partner, and companion. And yet.....he apparently planned to kill me from the very beginning. I was betrayed by him.”

Lin hung his head and bit his lip.

“.....Remembering what he did to me, I questioned whether the same thing would happen again.” So he wanted to be on his own.

“So that’s why you wrote that note and left?”

Lin nodded wordlessly. He was prepared for Banba to be angry with him. He was expecting him to say, ‘why dontcha believe in me? Would ya really condemn me even though I saved your life?’

However, Banba agreed readily.

“I do get that feeling.” He cast down his eyes in sadness. He had a serious yet somehow gloomy expression. “I was betrayed by someone dear to me before too.”

“.....You were?” Lin raised his head, eyes wide.

Even though he had lived with this man for more than half a year, this was the first time he heard of it. He did not expect Banba to have gone through a similar experience as he did.

“There was someone I liked a long time ago.”

Banba began to speak at length.

“It was when I was still in my spunky days in my early twenties.”

Lin could not imagine this wore out and laid back man as ‘spunky.’ Lin kept those thoughts to himself as he listened to Banba’s story.

“I was walkin’ and drinkin’ ‘round Nakasu when a woman approached me. She was a looker, and I fell for her on sight.”

For a man who used to mess around with women to fall for someone at first glance, she must have been beautiful.

“We dated, and I met her parents and even considered marrying her. But apparently she was a killer.”

“.....Hm?”

Lin had heard this story before at some point.

“She got close to me.....and tried to kill me.”

“That’s.....”

There was no doubt about it. The woman was Sayuri.

“When it happened I was shocked.After bein’ betrayed by my most loved person, I couldn’t bring myself to trust other women. I couldn’t help but think if I tried datin’ anyone I would just end up bein’ betrayed again. So ever since then, I stopped womanizin’.”

“Well, um.....Didn’t you just bring that onto yourself?”

Since you were philandering around, naturally you got that as consequence. Isn’t it your fault for falling for a woman’s charm and being lovestruck?

He felt a bit ripped off for listening to his story so seriously. Lin gave an apparent sigh in relief. “God, I feel like an idiot.”

Lin was overly paranoid with his incident with Feilang. *I’m such a fool*, he laughed. *What was I worried about? I thought I’d be betrayed by this guy? By this simpleton? I over thought it.*

“Oh, and this happened earlier,” Banba changed the topic as if he just recalled something. “I fell into the ocean.”

“.....Ha?” Fell into the ocean?

“My clothes still ain’t cleaned.”

“Yuck,” Lin had no idea what happened, but Banba seemed to have just left his wet clothes laying around. They had to smell. “Then do laundry.”

“I got lots of laundry to do. If someone ain’t gonna come home soon, I won’t have none clothes to wear.”

Banba glanced over to Lin and smirked.

Yeah, no, do your own laundry.

Lin wanted to say something in retort, but for some reason he smiled instead.

“.....I guess there’s nothing else to do about that.” Lin laughed and stood up. *We need to head back and do laundry.* “Then let’s hurry up and get out of here.”

They could not just loiter around here forever.

“Do you have a plan?”

There was no reply. Banba remained silent. *Is he thinking something over?*
Lin asked him again. “Hey, did you hear me?”

“.....Yeah. I hear you.”

“So what are we going to do?”

Banba pressed his index finger to his lips to suggest to talk quietly.

“The enemy may be watchin’ us. We can’t talk carelessly.”

That’s true, Lin agreed. There must be bugs installed, so even if they formulated a plan of escape in here it would fall through as their enemy would see through it.

“Lin-chan, how’s your leg?”

“It’s no problem.” The pain was gone. “The painkiller is still in effect.”

“That so? Good. I can also walk more or less.”

Banba stood up slowly with a hand pressed to his stomach.

“We seem to have been taken to the Kakyuu Group hideout.”

“.....Is that so?”

But why the Kakyuu Group’s place? Are they teamed up with Feilang in order to capture us?

“What place is this?.” Banba looked around the area. “Looks like a cell, but there’s strange bars.”

Lin had a realization. A large prison cell at the Kakyuu Group’s home base. He recalled a place fitting that description. “Maybe we’re in the execution room.”

“.....The execution room?”

“I heard rumors about it before.” Lin had heard other lackeys that lived in the same building as him talk about it before, when he was still in the Kakyuu Group. “This was built so the boss Long Fang Wang could tame a tiger.”

“Ahh, I see. So that’s why there’s such sturdy bars.”

“But the tiger died, so they had no use for this room. They destroyed the windows and made it airtight.” Lin dropped his voice to a lower pitch. “In other words, there’s a high possibility we’ll be executed.”

There was no reaction from Banba. He did not appear to have listened to Lin.

“That’s right.” Banba raised his voice as though he recalled something. “Today is the Ohori fireworks show.”

“Whaa?”

Lin was stunned. *What’s with that cheerful attitude?*

“This isn’t the time to worry about some fireworks show.”

“I’m lookin’ forward to them.”

“Why are you.....” Lin could not believe it. Banba was even more of an insolent to be thinking about fireworks at a time like this.

At that moment the door on the other side of the bars creaked open.

“Seems the enemy has finally come to greet us.” Banba smiled.

Nitta parked his car in front of the solemn main gate. He looked up at the building from his side mirror. It was the Kakyuu Group’s main office. The building was surrounded by a high and sturdy fence like that of a fortress.

“.....Hey, are you really going to go in there?”

Nitta looked over to Saruwatari from the side. “Of course,” Saruwatari snorted in reply to his partner’s unwillingness of his decision.

“That redhead bastard is hired by the Kakyuu Group.”

“Is that true?”

“Yeah,” Saruwatari nodded. It was certain, although he would not say who he had received that information from.

“Like I said though, there’s no certainty the man is even here. Actually, I think that possibility is rather low.”

“And if that’s the case, then I just gotta catch a high and mighty guy from the Kakyuu Group and threaten him to make him come out.”

Saruwatari spat out and got out of the car. He strided up to the gate and pressed on the intercom for the office. Seeing that, Nitta was taken back. He quickly poked his head out of the car window and called over to Saruwatari. "Eh? Wait, what are you doing?!"

A young man appeared from the side entrance. He was likely a lackey of the Kakyuu Group.

"Ah? Who the hell are you?" The man glared at Saruwatari menacingly.

Without even introducing himself, Saruwatari asked immediately.

"Where is that red headed bastard?"

The man frowned at the sudden question.

"Wha? What do you-"

Saruwatari moved. He pulled out his ninja sword and struck it into the man's heart. "You should have answered the question."

The man died with wide eyes and fell to the ground.

"Whaa, what are you doing?! Why did you kill him?!" Nitta exclaimed from behind him. Saruwatari did not acknowledge him and walked up to the intercom's camera and stuck out his tongue.

If he provoked them like this, there was no way they would stay quiet about it. Just as he expected, there was movement. There was the creaking sound, and the closed metal doors of the entrance gate slowly slid open. A group of thirty to forty men appeared from the other side of it. All of them had a villainous look to them. It was a masterpiece. All of them were holding weapons.

"Looks like you all are giving me a warm welcome."

Saruwatari grinned.

".....Oh man, looks like everyone is pissed." From the car, Nitta was holding his head in his hands.

"Nao, run away."

"You don't have to tell me!"

Nitta stepped on the acceleration pedal without waiting for a reply. After he watched the car speed off, Saruwatari turned back to his enemies.

The men rushed up to him while shouting out vile and ghastly comments. Saruwatari took out his shuriken. The first one he threw in exchange for a greeting splendidly struck the man in the head.

I'm in top form today.

Saruwatari looked among the group of men in black he was facing off with and smirked.

The doors to the execution room opened, and Feilang came inside. Three men in black likely from the Kakyuu Group followed in behind him.

"I feel like I'm a lion from the zoo." Lin cracked a joke after looking at the men from their side behind the bars.

"You, a lion? Don't you mean a kitten?"

Feilang snorted. He took out a cell phone and showed it to Lin.

"I took a look through this."

When Lin looked closer he saw that it was his cell phone. Feilang must have taken it while he was unconscious.

"There are some strange messages on here." Feilang read aloud some of the text while typing on the phone. "Buy mentaiko. Tomorrow's practice is at nine o'clock. We're going to Gannosu Stadium. What are these? You joined a baseball team? You're a killer though."

"This job builds up stress. I can let off steam by getting some exercise."

"I saw your call history too. All of the calls you made and receiving calls were to and from a Banba. He's this guy here, right? You sure seem to be on good terms with him."

Dammit, Lin grimaced. When Sayuri came to the office, he had repeatedly called Banba numerous times. And Banba had just continuously called Lin when he was searching for him.

"Ha," Lin gave a forced laugh. "On good terms with him? As if I would with

this guy.”

“You aren’t then?”

“Not at all!”

“I see, then I’m glad to hear it. You just escaped certain death.”

His comment pulled at Lin’s heart. Lin frowned. “.....What do you mean?”

Feilang did not respond. He instead turned to the Kakyuu Group members in the room and exchanged a look. “Hey,” he signaled for something.

The men held a large traveling bag. They took out various objects from inside it and tossed it through the metal bars. There was a survival knife, a short sword, an axe, a club, and even a metal bat. Numerous kinds of weapons clattered at Lin and Banba’s feet.

This was a familiar scene.

“You don’t mean to-”

It dawned on Lin.

You finally figured it out? Feilang laughed.

“Your observation skills are terrible, Mao. Did your senses dull from living the peaceful life?” He cheerfully smiled and then ordered them. “Kill each other. Between you two. I’ll let the one who survives leave.”

So that’s what you want, Lin bit into his lip. Feilang was trying to make him re experience their final exam.

‘You can kill him, right? Since you don’t get along with him at all. Come on, hurry it up then.’

There was no way Lin could do it. Lin stood stuck in place.

‘I told you to hurry up and be done with it!’ Feilang lost his temper and shouted at him. He took out a handgun out of the traveling bag and fired at Banba. There were the sound of consecutive gunshots, and the bullets missed Banba and hit the walls and floor. He made continuous warning shots for a few moments.

At last Feilang had ran out of bullets and tossed aside the gun. “Next time

they'll hit."

".....Got it."

The one who had answered was Banba. He reached for the metal bat among the pile of weapons they were given. A bat isn't something to hit people with – Banba had told him that before in the past. Then that must mean he had no intention of fighting.

They were being pressed to fight each other at this point. They had to follow along or else they would be killed. They had to make a plan to get out of this situation. Lin racked his brain on what they should do. Including Feilang, there were four opponents. Fortunately, Lin still had his knife-pistol in his pocket. He had fired once when he confronted Feilang earlier. So he had two shots left. Even if he used those two shots for each person, they would not be enough for the remaining two.

However, unfortunately the others had weapons. They had given them a knife, short sword, axe, and club.....they probably could use them. Lin could shoot two of the men, and use a knife or short sword to throw it at the other two. It was a tight situation, but he had no other choice.

Lin picked up a knife from among the weapons. At the same, he took out his own weapon from his pocket, and as not to be noticed he quickly side stepped.

"Hurry up and get started already." Feilang ordered again.

Lin moved immediately. He stretched his arm out and held up his knife pistol, pointing it towards Feilang. The moment he went to pull the trigger there was a gunshot. A sharp pain shot up his right arm.

A man from the Kakyuu Group held up a similar gun. He had aimed at Lin's right hand. The bullet collided with the blade of the knife, blowing away Lin's weapon far from him.

"You're naive, Mao." Feilang had a triumphant expression. "Your thought process is easy to see through."

Shit, Lin clicked his tongue.

"You seem adamant in killing him." Feilang slumped his shoulders. "Then I'll

just kill him for you.”

He told him and held up Lin’s cell phone.

“I have all of your associates. I’ll have them all experience the same fate. And all of your friends from your baseball team too. I’ll continue this until you kill someone. And if you don’t, then I’ll just kill them right in front of you. Just like this.”

Feilang took out another weapon from the bag. It was a crossbow.

“And I’ll start with him first.” He turned to Banba and held up the crossbow. “This arrow is dipped with poison. You’ll get to see your friend wither in pain and slowly die in front of you.”

“Stop!” Lin shouted. He grabbed the iron bars and yelled. “Your target is me, right?! Then shoot me!”

However, Feilang did not reply. He smirked and took aim at Banba.

“Lin.”

He was called by his name. It was Banba’s voice.

Lin turned around and looked at him.

“It’s alright.”

Banba had the bat resting against his shoulder. His right hand moved. He touched his belt and then his chest.

Lin immediately understood. He had sign that hand motion before. *That’s right, it’s that.* It was a sign. It was a sign for an end run. It meant he had to run the moment he swung.

Banba was telling him to run. To run and dodge. At the same time Feilang let the arrow fly.

However, even if he ran and got out by himself, he did not know what would happen to Banba.

‘When you get the sign for an end line, you gotta place trust in your comrades and run. Believe that they will hit it.’

He suddenly recalled what Banba had told him.

Believe that he would hit it.

Got it. If he is saying that, then I'll just have to believe he will do it. Lin gave a small nod to Banba so that his enemies would not notice his sign.

So don't you dare miss.

Feilang fired.

Under Zhao's orders, Suzuki had provided various weapons. He had arranged for an underground doctor to treat the men's wounds too. He assisted all of this to save Li's life. He had no idea what connection Xianming Lin had with this man, but Suzuki had about enough. He could not waste anymore time with this farce. He watched the end of the event with an anguished expression.

There were two men in the cell. Zhao was aiming a crossbow. He slowly pressed the trigger. There was a snapping sound, and the poison arrow sprung. At the exact same moment, the two men moved in sync.

The man off on the side, Lin, ran. He dashed for the weapon that had fallen onto the ground without hesitation. Banba on the other hand held the metallic bat, gripped it with both hands and hit back the arrow.

There was a small metallic sound.

"Gwahh."

One of Suzuki's subordinates cried out next to him. The fired arrow was hit back through the bars and struck his subordinate through his throat. He collapsed onto the ground, and while Suzuki was distracted by his subordinate's suffering Lin had picked up a knife.

His target was Zhao. He stepped into his blind spot on the left and pointed the knife-pistol at him. He pulled the trigger in the next moment. The gunshot resounded in the room.

The bullet hit Zhao in the stomach. Zhao groaned and pressed both of his hands to the wound. He wavered and dropped to the ground on his knees.

Banba made his next attack at Zhao. He picked up the short sword and threw it at Zhao. Zhao dropped down to the right to dodge the blade thrown at him. However, he was unable to do so fully. The sword struck him in his left thigh.

Zhao grit his teeth and grimaced at the pain.

Lin also held up his weapon and went to make another shot at Zhao. Suzuki had moved unconsciously.

He thought he could not let Zhao die. If he died, then Suzuki could not save that person. His body had moved on its own and stepped in front of Zhao. The bullet sunk into Suzuki's heart.

"Suzuki-san!" His other subordinate had yelled. He was assaulted by the sensation of his lungs collapsing, and blood poured out of his wound heavily. Suzuki gritted his teeth and ordered. "Take him out of here! Hurry.....ngh!"

His subordinate nodded and picked up the fallen Zhao. He immediately rushed outside and quickly closed the door.

After Suzuki watched them leave, he fell to his side. It hurt to breathe. He could not feel any strength in his limbs. At this rate, he could die.

Suzuki coughed and spat up blood. His red stained lips curled into a smile.

This is fine.

His eyelids grew heavy. He unwilling closed his eyes, and the face of that man appeared in his mind.

Lin had aimed to kill. He only managed to fire one bullet at Feilang. And moreover, he had only hit him in the stomach. That was hardly a vital area. *Just how soft had I become?*

One man had picked up the injured Feilang and ran out of the building. The doors shut, and they were once again shut inside.

"Dammit."

Lin tutted and kicked the bars.

"Here we go," Lin heard an unnervous voice from behind him. Banba had lowered himself to the ground and sat down cross-legged.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

"I'm a bit tuckered out, so I thought to rest up a bit."

Lin sighed in exasperation as the man chuckled. *How recklessly carefree is this*

man? “This isn’t the time to rest. This is a gas chamber.”

From what he had heard, this building had surveillance cameras installed and Long Fang Wang enjoyed himself with a drink while watching the people inside die in suffering. So if the Kakyuu Group felt like it, they could kill them at any time.

“.....Then what you’re sayin’ is,” Banba looked up and pointed to the ceiling. “That this here smoke is poisoned gas?”

“What? You’re kidding me-” Lin looked up and lost color to his complexion at the sight.

A white smoke began to emit from the equipment installed on the ceiling. The smoke began to get thicker and grow.

Lin quickly covered his mouth.

“They got quite the likin’ to execute people by poisoned gas.”

“Don’t talk, you idiot! You’ll breathe that in!”

Lin had yelled when it happened.

There was a large bang from outside the building.

“Oh, the fireworks have started.” Banba said.

“Just how stupid are you.....!”

This isn’t the time to be interested in fireworks.

“Okay, got it.”

Banba suddenly nodded. He grabbed Lin’s hand and pulled him around with a strong force.

“Eh? Wait, hold on.”

What is he doing? He looked up at Banba’s face in doubt. His lips had slightly moved. He must have whispered something, but it was blown away by the sound of fireworks going off.

Banba smirked with a toothy grin. I can’t believe it. He would smile in a situation like this?

The sound of fireworks stopped for a moment, and for a moment the vicinity had fallen silent.

“Boom.”

Banba whispered something incomprehensible.

The next moment there was a roaring sound, and the building shook.

Is this an earthquake?

Lin swallowed.

No, it's not. This isn't an earthquake.

There was the scent of gunpowder.

That was an explosion.

Ninth Inning

Top of Ninth Inning

“Old man, I got a favor to ask of ya.”

Banba gave him a friendly smile as usual.

“A favor? What kind?”

“In the one in a million chance that somethin’ was to happen to us, I want ya to come save us.”

Banba told them he was going to go get Lin now. And he expressed that he wanted to take an extra measure of caution just in case.

“You’re fixin’ to make this old retired man work? It’s gonna cost you.”

Banba gave him a smile in reply. “Fine by me.”

I guess there’s no helping it, Genzo shrugged his shoulders and consented. “I’ll pitch in and help my cute junior.”

“What’s this?” Enokida leaned forward as he finished his ramen. “This sounds like an intriguing conversation. Let me in on it.”

“Of course.” Banba nodded. “I’ll put a transmitter on me, so Enokida-kun can track my movements.”

Understood, Enokida had nodded.

“Ah, that’s right.” Enokida took out a black object from his bag. “Put this on you. Use it in emergency situations.”

“.....What is this?”

“A redback spider communicator.”

“A communicator? You made somethin’ weird again...” Genzo smiled bitterly.

“It’s an exceptional item that allows you to make contact handsfree. If you put it in your ear you’ll be able to hear the other’s voice, and it’ll also pick up your own voice too.”

Genzo and Banba both took their own communicator.

“.....I just put this thing here into my ear, right?” He seemed a bit uncomfortable with it. “This feels creepy, I tell ya. It would be better if it wasn’t in this spider shape.”

“But it’s cool.” Enokida pouted before taking something else out of his bag. “I have other items we can use too. I have a redback spider grenade and a redback spider plastic bomb.”

Enokida placed the large spider shaped bomb next to his bowl of ramen.

“I also have a keyholder, but would you need it?”

“Don’t need it.”

“Anyway, I’m gonna call you as soon as I meet up with Lin-chan safely.” From there it was a twenty minute drive by car. “If you don’t hear back from me in thirty minutes-”

Then that meant some unexpected event occurred. And in that instance, Enokida had to track Banba’s whereabouts provided from the transmitter device and go save him. That was their plan.

In the end, there was no call from Banba even after thirty minutes. Since Genzo could not make contact with him, it meant Banba was not stuck in traffic from the large fireworks festival. Apparently something had happened to him.

Genzo quickly closed the shop and headed home. He pulled out items he used in the past from the drawer: clothes, sunglasses and various kinds of weapons. As he put on his suit and beige coat, he felt nostalgia wash over him. It had been quite some time since he had last worn this.

Finishing his preparations, Genzo got into his car. He picked up Enokida on the way, who sat on the passenger’s side. “So where are they now?”

“I’ve been watching Banba-san’s movement until this point. There’s been sudden movement. From the speed of the marker, I’d guess he’s in a car, but it’s going in the opposite direction he was heading from earlier.”

That would mean Banba did not get into his own car. “.....He was kidnapped?”

“Probably,” Enokida opened up his laptop and pointed at the screen. “Right now, he’s right here.”

The screen displayed the map of Fukuoka. The red mark indicated Banba’s current location.

“What’s this building here?”

“The Kakyuu Group’s main base.”

The Kakyuu Group – Genzo was taken aback when he heard that name. “This has become something fierce.”

It seemed like this would be a tough job. Genzo sighed at himself for accepting to help so readily, but started the car nonetheless.

They arrived at the Kakyuu Group’s main office roughly twenty minutes later. They parked a bit of ways from the building and examined the map shown on the laptop screen. The blinking red marker suddenly disappeared.

“They must have noticed it.” The enemy may have found the transmitter device on Banba’s person and crushed it.

“Or perhaps it just stopped working. It’s not good in heat and water.”

Genzo had an unpleasant image pass his mind at Enokida’s words. Perhaps they were being submerged under water and tortured. In the worst case scenario, they could have been reduced to burnt corpses.

Genzo immediately put the redback spider communicator into his right ear and attempted to call Banba. “Banba, can you hear me now? Give me a reply.”

However, there was no response. He did not hear anything.

He didn’t hand me over a dub, right? Genzo frowned and looked over to the mushroom-headed man. He called out to Banba again, but this time in a slightly louder voice.

“Can you hear me? Banba. Do you hear?”

‘.....Yeah. I hear you.’

He finally received a reply.

“Thank heavens.”

He managed to make contact. Banba was thankfully alive.

‘The enemy may be watchin’ us.’ Genzo heard his voice clearly. Their connection was good. ‘We can’t talk carelessly.’

“Is that right?” Genzo nodded at Banba’s words. The enemy may not be with them presently, but there was the high chance they were being watched. That was what Genzo took away from what Banba told him.

“Tell me your situation as much as you can. Are you injured?”

After a few seconds he heard his voice in reply.

‘Lin-chan, how’s your leg?’

Apparently Lin was near him as well.

‘That so? Good. I can also walk more or less.’

They were both injured? It did not seem to be that bad, but there was still room to worry.

“Banba, listen to me well now. You guys are currently in the Kakyuu Group’s main base.”

‘.....We seem to have been taken to the Kakyuu Group hideout.’ Banba repeated. He probably did so to inform Lin of their predicament.

“And looks like the GPS got broke, so the tracker is gone now.” They were unable to locate Banba and Lin now. “Do ya know where you are right now?”

‘What place is this? Looks like a cell, but there’s strange bars.’

“Cell? Bars?”

Were they locked into a prison cell?

‘.....The execution room?’

Genzo repeated Banba’s whisper. “The execution room?”

Enokida exclaimed next to him.

“Ah, I may know where they’re at.”

He began to type on the keyboard and brought up the layout of the main office on his laptop screen. He pointed to a certain spot on the map. “It’s

probably here. I've heard about it before. They have an execution room in the Kakyuu Group's main office. I guess it was used as a small room to keep a tiger in before."

Genzo nodded in understanding and addressed Banba again.

"We know where you're at. We're headin' over now to get you. Today's the fireworks show, so there ain't gonna be no issue with firing off guns."

The gunshots would be blown away by the sound of the fireworks going off.

'That's right. Today is the Ohori fireworks show.'

"It's been a good ten years since I've last gone out onto the battlefield, so I'm gonna go all out." Genzo took the explosives in hand and grinned.

'I'm lookin' forward to them.' Banba smiled as well.

Genzo turned the car around and parked alongside the fence. He stepped out of the window and climbed onto the roof of the car to inspect the inside of the place. He did not sense anyone's presence. There were not even anyone on lookout. Now was his chance. Genzo jumped down from the vehicle and landed into the estate; infiltration was a success.

He concealed himself as he headed further in carefully with the Japanese sword Banba entrusted him with in hand. After a while he saw the white walls of a building. It looked like the outside of a warehouse.

I found it. That's the execution room. Banba and Lin are locked up in there.

And suddenly people rushed out of the building. A man in black was carrying an injured young man. He locked the door and left the execution room behind him.

"Hey, what are you going to do to the guys inside?"

"Kill them with gas."

Genzo heard part of a frightening conversation. After he saw the men disappear out of sight, he called Banba again. "Banba, you alright?"

After a few moments –

'I'm a bit tuckered out, so I thought to rest up a bit.'

He heard Banba's comment. He seemed to be talking to Lin.

"Those guys said they was gonna kill you with gas. You two."

'Then what you're sayin' is that this here smoke is poisoned gas?'

It seemed they did not have much time left. Genzo had to get them outside quickly.

'They got quite the likin' to execute people by poisoned gas.'

Banba whispered cheerfully when there was a large booming sound. Vivid colored fireworks shot up into the night sky. The time was around eight o'clock. The Ohori fireworks show had begun.

Genzo set up the explosives on the building's wall. They were the redback spider plastic bombs Enokida gave them. "I completed my preparations for launch."

'Oh, the fireworks have started.'

"I set up bombs near the entrance, so head to the opposite side."

'Okay, got it.'

"Alrighty then, I'll do a countdown."

Genzo smirked mischievously.

"Three."

'Two.' Banba replied back.

"One."

'Boom.' The two whispered at the same time.

Genzo pressed the detonation switch. There was the thundering sound of an explosion. The wall collapsed, creating a large hole in it. Two men leapt through it.

"Hey, you guys! You alright?" Genzo turned towards them and called out to them.

What on earth just happened? Lin's eyes were wide in shock. There was a sudden explosion and the execution room was blasted open. The metal bars were also broken, and a large hole was made in the wall.

"Lin!" Banba exclaimed and was pushing him to move faster. "We gotta hurry out of here!"

Banba and Lin passed through the hole in the wall, escaping from the poisoned gas. Once they get outside and breathe in its fresh air, they find themselves in a courtyard with a magnificent and spacious Japanese garden. There were pine trees, garden lanterns and even a bridge suspended over a pond. A large mansion stood before them. It was a familiar building to Lin. They were at the Kakyuu Group's headquarters. He was brought here once by Zhang in the past.

A man appeared from the shadow of a pine tree. Even though it was summer, the man was wearing a beige coat. He wore sunglasses and held a submachine gun that was resting against his shoulder. He was in a strange and gaudy outfit. *Who is he? Is he an enemy?* Lin braced himself at once.

"Hey, you guys! You alright?"

The man yelled and walked over to them. He lowered his sunglasses a bit and grinned. Lin saw the familiar wrinkles and facial features – it was Genzo.

"Gramps, why are you-"

Lin's eyes widened. *Why is Genzo here?*

"I asked him to be here." Banba was the one to answer for the unexpected and surprising appearance of reinforcements next to him. He turned towards Genzo and smiled. "Thank you, old man. You saved us."

"It's all good." Genzo told him and lightly waved his hand.

"When did you ask for backup....." Lin did not know.

"Before I went to get you."

Before he went to get me – then he means before we were caught by Feilang? Did Banba know I was followed? Or did he prepare for any unexpected outcome? But if so, how did he make contact with Genzo? Several questions

came to Lin's mind. "What do you mean?" He ended up asking him, but Banba was interrupted before he could answer.

A few men dashed out of the manor when they heard the explosion. Genzo immediately took out an explosive like object from his pocket. It was a redback spider grenade. He pulled out the pin and threw it towards their enemies. The grenade exploded, blasting the men away.

They had handguns. The remaining men who managed to escape from the explosion took them out. Seeing that, Genzo sprinted. He kept his posture low and pointed his submachine gun at them and fired as he slid. *Dadadada*. Genzo cleaned up the rest of the men, raining them down with gunshots in quick succession.

"He still got it," Banba was awed by Genzo's fluid mobility, despite his age.

".....Even so, there wasn't much of them."

Genzo muttered as he looked at the pile of bodies. For such a loud noise, they should have been surrounded by a crowd of men. And yet only five or six men appeared. The lackeys must have underestimated them.

Or were the others out elsewhere? In either case, this was lucky for us.

"Leave the rest of the small fry to me." Genzo tossed over Banba's Japanese sword. "Go an' finish your job."

"Gotcha." Banba took it in one hand and nodded in agreement.

Banba and Lin went off on their own and would be picked up by Genzo later by car. They infiltrated the estate from the garden by breaking through the glass doors. There were hallways that stretched down on either side.

"I'll leave the killing of the executives to you." Lin turned away from Banba. "I'll find Feilang."

"Hold your horses." Lin was grabbed by his shoulder just as he took a step forward. "Whatcha gonna do when you find him?"

"Naturally, I'm going to kill him."

"Is that really alright with you?"

Lin's words caught in his throat at the question.

"You was friends, right?"

".....But I can't let him live."

Feilang looked through his cell phone. If he let Feilang escape as it was now, the same event would happen again. This time was Banba, but Lin had no idea who he would target next. It could be Enokida or Genzo. Lin did not want everyone to get involved.

".....Should I do it in your place?" Banba suggested. *Should I kill Feilang instead? Is there any need for me to chase down my once best friend and finish him off? If I do not want this to weigh down on me, I could task it to someone else.* That was what Banba implied.

Lin shook his head.

"I'll do it." *I have to. I have to settle this with my own hands.* That was what he felt. "Please let me do it."

Lin brushed off Banba's hand and began walking off when they heard another man's voice.

"We meet again, stupid face."

They turned around, startled. At the end of the hallway stood a familiar man. He wore a hoodie and black sarouel pants, and he had a kerchief covering his mouth. In his right hand, he held a ninja sword.

"Geh."

Lin grimaced. It was him – the Submarine Ninja. *Out of all places, why is this guy here? And at this timing.*

"Whoaa.....The troublesome fella is here." Banba made an apparent, displeased expression. "Did ya come all the way here to see me?"

"Hell no."

The ninja held a man with his left arm. He must have been a lackey for the Kakyuu Group. He was gravely injured; blood poured freely over his body and he was gasping.

“I have business with a redheaded hitman called Zhao. I asked this guy here, and he said he’d be in this manor. When I looked around I found you guys.”

This guy is targeting Feilang?

Lin could not avoid colliding with him then if they were pursuing the same man. However, Lin was painfully aware of his true strength. He was not someone he could easily get away from. Lin frowned.

“Hurry up and go, Lin-chan.”

Banba suddenly whispered. He placed a hand on Lin’s shoulder as he passed by him. “Leave it to me to hold back this fella.”

Lin nodded and turned on his heel.

“There’s no way I’m letting you kill that hitman.”

After Banba watched Lin take off, he faced back towards the man in front of him.

“Then walk away.”

“Wha? No way in hell.” Saruwatari spat.

I reckon’ you wouldn’t, Banba smiled bitterly. This man was not someone he could reach a compromise with.

“If you’re gonna be in the way, then I’m gonna go all out to stop you.”

Banba withdrew his Japanese sword and got into position.

“You’re the one in the way!” Saruwatari took off into a sprint and leapt high into the air. He took out his sword and swung it down at Banba.

The Japanese sword and ninja sword clashed against each other. Due to the different in length of their weapons, Banba was the one at a disadvantage in the narrow hallway. He could not swing his sword as easily as he needed to.

“As always, you’re a bloodthirsty guy.....!”

Once Banba blocked the attack with his sword, he swung to his left, causing Saruwatari to collide with the sliding screen. The sliding door was unable to sustain his weight and it broke from the force. Saruwatari dropped into the room unceremoniously.

“.....That’s my line.” Saruwatari tutted and quickly got to his feet.

Banba followed after him, stepping inside the room. It was a spacious and vacant Japanese style room, which must have been used as a sleeping area for the lackeys that lived here. In this space, Banba had enough room to fight properly in.

He re-adjusted the grip on his sword and observed his opponent. Saruwatari was already fixing his posture, preparing himself for their fight with his ninja sword in his right hand and his scabbard in his left.

Just as Banba was about to make his next attack, a sharp pain spiked from his side. The wound he received when Feilang shot him stung. The painkiller must have worn off. Banba feigned normalcy and faced off his opponent. The more he drew this fight out, the more slow he would get. He had to finish this as soon as possible.

Banba was the first to move. He pointed the tip of his blade at the other and thrust forward. Saruwatari rolled over in a dodge, resulting in Banba’s sword getting stuck in the sliding door.

“What’s up with you? You’re in such a rush.”

Saruwatari moved behind Banba while he pulled out his weapon from there. Banba blocked the blow aimed for his head.

However, Saruwatari was fast. He made another attack immediately after the other one, landing a swing kick into Banba’s side. Banba wobbled from the impact and dropped down to his knees. Normally he would be able to dodge the attack, but his body was not listening to him as he would want it to at the moment.

“.....I want to hurry up and see the fireworks.”

“Uh-huh.”

The intensity of his wound spiked. The pain increased every time he moved. An uncomfortable sweat began to form on his brow from it – not from the heat of the summer night.

This could get serious.

He separated himself from Saruwatari in retreat and quietly took in repeated breaths. His breathing was getting ragid.

“Don’t you run away.”

Banba had tried to get away from his enemy, but Saruwatari did not lighten up on his attacks. He took out a black shaped object from his pocket.

It was a shuriken.

Saruwatari went to throw the shuriken, raising up his left leg before dropping it down swiftly. It was a quick motion. His body weight shifted from his right leg to his left, and his arm snapped forward behind it. It was a unique form that Banba could not forget after seeing it once.

Banba changed the grip on his sword so he held it with both hands. He anticipated for the other to release the shuriken, and in turn he would hit it back.

The shuriken came flying directly at him. Banba saw its trajectory; all he had to do was match the timing. He pressed his left foot down hard so his swing would not be slow. He rotated his hips and swung his sword.

He thought he had it.

“Wha-”

However, there was no resistance. Banba’s eyes widened in shock.

His Japanese sword had swung in air; he had missed. The shuriken, however, lodged itself into Banba’s side. Banba suddenly realized. That trajectory was a curved ball.

The next moment, a sharp pain ran up his leg. A shuriken had sunk into it. Banba wavered and bent over. He lost his footing and collapsed onto the ground. Banba immediately looked up to see Saruwatari standing before him. His ninja sword was pointed at the tip of Banba’s nose, and the man smirked.

The previous pitch from earlier had a trajectory in which it curved downward toward the batter’s feet.

“A sinker?”

Banba muttered and smiled. *I sure didn't expect him to improve the amount of pitches he could make.* “.....This is my loss then.”

“This time.” Saruwatari gave him a satisfied smile back. “This makes one victory and one loss.”

Saruwatari snorted and sheathed his sword.

“I leave you with just this much for today.You're not at top form anyway.”

He said, glancing at Banba's condition. From what he could see, the bandages around his torso were dyed red. Banba's wound most have opened.

“.....I give you my thanks.”

Banba smiled bitterly while applying pressure to his stomach.

“Huh? Where're you going?” He called out to Saruwatari who had turned on his heel.

“I'm going back to Kokura. I'm satisfied for beating you.”

I don't care about that Zhao now, he said while stifling a yawn.

Banba seemed to have succeeded in stopping Saruwatari. But he was unsatisfied how he achieved that even though he had boasted to Lin to leave it to him.

“.....I'll hit that pitch next time.”

Banba stated with a mix of resentment as he faced the other as he walked away.

“Ha!” Saruwatari turned around and laughed. “I'll strike you out with three pitches.”

Although Lin looked around the entire office, he could not find Feilang. There was not even a single person from the Kakyuu Group. *Did someone else get to him already? Like Genzo or that ninja guy?*

He ran through the manor, and when he finally spotted a member of the group he had demanded for his whereabouts and was told, “he went out of the back door.”

Lin immediately rushed out of the mansion. He cut through the garden laid

out with gravel and crossed over to the back end of the mansion. There was a small gate there. The door was open, and the ground was stained with blood. It was still fresh – it had to be Feilang’s blood. He must have gone through here.

The trail of blood stretched over the concrete, indicating as to where Feilang went. When Lin followed it, he was brought down a path closed in by trees.

Feilang was there.

The dim street lights illuminated his form faintly. He held a hand to his stomach and pressed on, sometimes faltering as though he would collapse.

“Feilang!”

Feilang halted at Lin’s shout. Although he was inflicted with a severe wound, there was the possibility he could still attack. Lin held his weapon, ready. He approached him while remaining vigilant.

“.....Mao,” Once he had closed the distance, Feilang turned around to face him. “You can’t kill me.”

Blood poured from his mouth. He grinned, showing his bloody teeth. His visage from back then flashed through his mind for a moment – the same, carefree smile like in the past.

At once, Lin stopped his approach. The memories from five years ago rushed through his mind like a flood. Feilang’s yet innocent face. The kindness he gave him. The generosity he provided. And the times he spent with him, encouraging, reprimanding, and extolling each other. They all came to him, as clear as day in his mind.

There was a spot for him at his side. There was always this smile when he was in front of him. This blindingly brilliant smile had saved him numerous times over; it shone a path that had been shut off from him.

‘When we get out of here, how about we work together? Let’s team up and live happily together.’

That promise was his sole hope. It was the first dream he ever had since he had been born. He had been bound by that the whole time.

“See?”

Feilang smiled, seeing the Lin immobilized. *You can't kill me, right?* He laughed at him. That it was the same as back then.

Lin shook his head slowly.

".....No, I can kill you."

He could do it now.

"I'm not the same as back then."

He nodded firmly. *That's right. I'm not like I was six years ago. So I can kill you now.*

It had been a long six years for him to regain what he had discarded back then once more. He could not let that be taken from him again.

Lin hardened his resolve and gripped his knife.

'A moment's hesitation will end with you losing your life. That is the world you'll be living in from now on.'

Lin smiled instantly upon recalling what the instructor had told him from that time. *Shut the hell up, you damn instructor.*

".....Goodbye, Fei."

Lin thrust down his knife perpendicularly into the man's heart and then twisted it to the right strongly. He felt the sensation of a living being made of flesh and blood eerily under his palm.

"U-gwah....ngh."

Feilang's eyes widened, and he spat out blood. He slumped down to his knees and fell down face first.

".....Mao." He called his name.

Feilang faintly smiled while taking in repeated ragged breaths.

"I was.....envious of you."

He continued without restraint, his blood stained lips shaking.

"You have a kind mother.....have a family.....and you have talent.....You always had better grades than me."

I guess so, Lin muttered back. However, it was different now. His family was dead.

“You have friends too.....You always.....had everything I lacked.....”

He coughed out blood.

“Up until the very end.....I’ve always been envious of you-”

His words cut off. Feilang had stopped moving. Lin reached out and touched his wrist, checking for a pulse. Feilang was dead. For certain this time.

Lin placed his hand over Feilang’s eyes and closed them. Even closed, his face looked no different than six years ago.

Feilang is dead; I killed him.

Yet strangely there were no tears. There was not even that hollowness like back then either. Somehow, he felt relieved.

“.....It really was our fate for only one of us to live.”

This man was also a part of him from that time. And now Feilang’s ghost that was born in his past had finally been vanquished. Lin was released from him.

He gave a deep and long sigh. He looked up at the sky and saw fireworks.

“Lin-chan! Lin-chaan!”

He heard Banba’s voice through the sound of the fireworks. Banba was calling for him. He was waving at him from the other side of the path.

“Lin-chan, you alright?”

Lin nodded back as Banba ran up to him, breathless.

“.....I’m alright. It’s over.”

He glanced down at Feilang’s body, turning away from him. Banba did not ask anything else on the matter.

“Actually, are you alright?” Lin looked over to him and was taken aback. He pointed to Banba’s leg. “You have a shuriken in your leg.”

“Ahh, this? I’m alright.”

“What about that ninja bastard? Did you kill him?”

“No,” he shook his head with a bitter smile. “He let me go.”

Both of them were covered in wounds. They walked together on unsteady feet to the old car parked in front of the back exit. Genzo was in the driver’s seat, and Enokida was in the passenger’s seat.

Hurry and get in, Genzo signaled to them.

“Now then, let’s go home.”

Suddenly Lin’s consciousness wavered and strength was pulled away from his body.

“.....Lin-chan?”

He heard Banba’s voice oddly from far away. Before he could think more of it, Lin stumbled and collapsed.

Hero Interview & Post-Game Ceremony

Hero Interview

‘He hit it! The ball is reaching! Reaching! And it’s in! It’s a hoome ruuuun!’

The shrill yelling of the live announcer was extremely annoying. Lin woke up because of it. He found himself on a bed. His memories were hazy. He did not remember anything past when he tried to get into Genzo’s car. *Did I collapse there?* Because of his lightheadedness he must have lost consciousness.

‘It’s a walk-off three runs! He did it! He has beat his own record with 606 hits! Player Cabrera has settled this match with a record breaking hit on the extra tenth inning!’

“.....Damn that’s loud.”

Lin muttered quietly as he sat up.

“Ah, you’re awake.”

The man with the ruffled hair looked away from the TV and turned towards him. He was slurping the noodles in his cup ramen noisely. It was a familiar sight to Lin.

“How’s your injury?”

Banba asked him while chewing his noodles. It was a familiar Hakata dialect.

“Will you have some too?”

He asked and held another cup of ramen for him. The familiar scent of Tonkotsu did not whet Lin’s appetite.

“No thanks.” Lin shook his head. “On the other hand, you sure can eat a lot considering the wound you got.”

While Lin had been away, the Banba Detective Office had gotten horrendous. As he expected, there was trash and dirty dishes piled up. Lin looked around the room and sighed, *I have a lot to clean up on.* Tomorrow he would have to spend a full day cleaning and doing laundry.

“In the end, I couldn’t go to the fireworks show.”

Banba turned off the television and slumped his shoulders. He was disappointed that he was unable to participate in the Yamakasa and unable to see the Ohori fireworks.

“You can see fireworks whenever though.”

Today was August 1st. They were still in the middle of the season for them.

“Then let’s go to the one in the eastern ward with everyone.” Banba suggested in a cheerful tone.

With everyone – the faces of his teammates came to Lin’s mind. *Everyone would be going? Seems like it’ll be rowdy.*

Lin was aware of how big the fireworks shows get, but he had never went to one before. *That seems like fun*, he imagined himself among the crowd of people. And he would put on a yukata and wear geta. He wanted to try toffee apples too.

“.....Ah, that’s right, Lin-chan.”

Banba suddenly spoke as though he just recalled something.

“What is it?” Lin turned to face him.

Banba gave him a smile.

“Welcome back.”

Lin gazed at Banba, taken aback.

Banba repeated to the stunned Lin once more. “Welcome back.”

Yeah, he let slip.

Actually, I’ve never said it before, haven’t I? Not anytime today or even now.

The feeling finally came to him. He was back. He managed to come back – to this place.

So he was able to say it at last.

“.....I’m home.”

For some reason, tears welled up in his eyes. His voice hitched, and he was

unable to say it well.

Post-Game Ceremony

It was the first week of September. Today there was a fireworks show in the eastern ward. The Ramens cancelled their practice to go see the fireworks together, so Lin changed into a yukata at the bar Babylon that Jiro ran.

After Jiro finished outfitting him, he then went to style his hair.

“That short bob you had was rather cute though.” Jiro stated proudly while working on Lin’s long hair. “But this suits you best for sure.”

“.....You think?”

Lin muttered in indifference and then thought back on it.

A month ago, Lin had cut his hair.

‘Is this really alright?’

Jiro questioned him in all seriousness. That had been the third time he had asked him that same question.

‘Yeah.’

Lin was seated on the stool in Jiro’s store and nodded to him in affirmation. The cloth that was wrapped around his neck completely covered his whole body.

‘Is this really, truly alright with you?’

‘I said it’s fine. Stop being so insistent about it!’

Jiro held the scissors, hesitant.

‘But hair is a woman’s very life!’

‘Hair will just grow out though.Besides, I’m a guy.’

‘I can really just cut it all?’

‘I said it’s fine.’

Jiro relented reluctantly at Lin’s firm reply. ‘.....Alright then.’

He weaved the scissors through Lin’s hair. There was nothing else but the

clipping sounds in the quiet facility. Lin's brown hair dropped down in chunks onto the cloth he wore.

'Ah no, this is such a waste. It was such pretty hair.....'

Once Jiro had finished the haircut, he handed a hand mirror over to Lin. Lin peered inside the mirror. He gave a smile seeing himself with a short bob. 'This is great.' *This suits me fine.* And it was rather cool on the back of his neck. He felt refreshed.

'Still, why did you decide to do this so suddenly? I never expected you'd want to cut your hair short.Did you have a breakup, by chance?'

'As if.'

Lin snorted.

'I've had enough letting it grow like that.'

He felt his sister was by his side when he dressed as a woman. With the loss of his sister, he had been enveloped by loneliness.

However, he was alright. He felt he could live on without having to do that.

'I decided to stop crossdressing.'

Jiro's eyes widened seeing his bright expression and said in surprise, 'my.'

It had been a month since his haircut. Although Lin had proclaimed he would stop crossdressing he put on makeup and wore a female's yukata for the day. The design was a light blue morning glory on a white background. His long hair was pulled back into a high ponytail.

"Alright, I'm finished."

Just as Jiro had finished styling his hair, the door to the bar opened and Enokida and Martinez entered.

"Huh?"

Enokida, wearing a *jinbei* outfit, tilted his head seeing Lin.

"What's with that getup? Didn't you say you wouldn't crossdress anymore?"

".....I couldn't help it. Men's clothing is just so dull." Lin pouted.

Lin had resolved to no longer crossdress and had his hair cut. However, in the end he preferred this. He was unable to bear with it after three days and put on a skirt. He apparently liked to deck himself up in women's clothing. He put in hair extensions until his hair grew long again.

"See?" Martinez huffed next to Enokida. He wore a gray yukata and a boater. "I told you right? He just likes it."

".....So it seems."

What are you two talking about? Lin frowned. "What? Do you have a problem with me crossdressing?"

"Well, I think it's fine. As long as you enjoy it." Banba piped up from the stool he was sitting on. "Besides, everything looks good on you."

Lin immediately felt better at that sentence. "You bet." Lin grinned, showing his teeth. Life had a lot of restrictions. So he felt he could do whatever he liked.

"Shigematsu-san and Saitou-kun went ahead and picked a spot for us. Gen-san and Saeki-chan will head over once they finish up their work."

"What about Yamato-kun?"

"Said he was working."

"His host job?"

"No, pickpocketing. He said he was going there ahead of us to do work."

"It's a good time to make some money for him."

He must be wandering through the masses at the fireworks show pickpocketing the crowd. Lin gave a small sigh from imagining it.

Jiro walked outside, leading Misaki in her pink yukata by the hand.

"Let's get going. Everyone, get in."

Banba said as they got into the van.

"Sounds like they're gonna fire five hundred more this year more than last year."

Lin smiled while imagining the circular shapes blooming in the night sky. *I'm*

excited for them.



Translation Notes:

1. Morning Glory is a type of flower.
2. Geta (下駄) is a traditional Japanese footwear you usually wear with yukata or a kimono.
3. Yukata (浴衣) is a kimono made of a light cotton, and as such you wear these in summer since it's lighter.
4. Jinbei is a traditional Japanese clothing for men. It's usually worn as more of a nightwear or something to wear around the house in the summer.

Afterword

“It’s alright already. This is the third time now; we got it!” You may think this, but just in case: this story is fiction. The actual places, people, and groups in real life that appear in it are not correlated at all, so please keep that in mind. I ask that you interpret this Fukuoka as part of its own world.

And now, I was thankfully able to write a third volume. As you may be aware, this work is linked to two other previous works, so when you have time, I hope you enjoy the beginning starting from volume one on another read.

One of the themes I had for this third work was “things that Lin couldn’t do before that he now can” in Lin’s development, but I am absolutely pleased to end his growth how I understood and how it turned out. While I feel great joy to continue writing this story, I did manage to complete this work as a whole.

A year has passed since my debut, but I am just completely appreciative for myself and Lin to have been able to grow a little bit together. So for Wada-sama and Endou-sama in the editorial department who have been assisting me over this past year, once again, thank you so much. I look forward to working more with you as we go.

And there were many wonderful and varied illustrations this time around. Hako Ichiro, who does these illustrations, had made his debut at the same time as me and has helped me publicly and privately. Ichiro-sama, thank you as always.

And there were many others who made contributions as well. For everyone who took part in publishing this, I am deeply grateful.

And I give my thanks to my friend N (a Kitakyushu resident) who gave advice for the Kitakyushu dialect and my father as my baseball advisor (his grass-lot baseball record is thirty-five years).

And lastly, to everyone who picked up this work. For purchasing this novel and even spending your precious time for it, thank you so much.

I truly hope to meet again in the next volume!

